Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Book: 42

The way I was Remembered

Interval: 6

Continued:

‘Small towns are funny places; everybody thinks they know everybody.’

They bought, they sold, live in fear of getting old getting cold. Life to death, is all a myth just a wish, only to walk in the dark, to make their mark, in the life they embark.

Yet, they know what is so, nowhere to run to go, they come and go, with nothing to show. With some that are high and some low. However, they always know narrow minds never change, only to rearrange, in the exchange.

Memories never fade, and the ones that make their lies get paid. It is all slipping away from day today. There is always someone with something to say.

Whatever come whatever may, it is just another day... in a small town, with dreams going in the ground, with only names on rocks to be found.

Where one person runs it all and is crowned, we dance like fools we are her clowns. That's just life bowing down to a small town, it is just the words going around. With so much doom and gloom, I suppressed that crowned witch, not on her broom.

Following behind like the moon, or busy making drama in a room.

Sounds just like me- how about you?

~Naddalin~

(Back to now, and at the week’s end before the week of the dream study.)

I was daydreaming to think there is nothing cuter than seeing your girlfriend, riding a dildo in front of you just so you can see her give her self-pleasure SEE ING LOVING HER DOING JUST THAT ALSO PLEASING. I love Emmah!

‘The dream assignment was over- for the most part.’

Jinger moaned and for some moments then glanced up at her- ceiling.

‘And it looks like it’s going to rain.’

‘What’s that got to do with our homework?’ Said Emmah, her eyebrows raised.

‘Nothing,’ said Jinger at once, her ears reddening.

At five to five Naddalin bided the- other two goodbyes and set off for Scott's office on her- the third floor. When she- knocked on the- door she would- called,' Come in,' in a sugary voice. She- entered cautiously, looking around. She- had known the office under three of its previous occupants.

In the- days when Mr. Hilliard had lived there, it had been plastered in smiling portraits of herself. When Lupin had occupied it, it was likely you would meet some fascinating Dark creature in a cage or reservoir if you came to call. In the- impostor Moody's days, it had been packed with various instruments and artifacts for the- detection of doing, entertainment and disguise.

Now, however, it looked unrecognizable to me and them. The

surfaces had all been draped in lacy covers and cloths.

There were several vases full of dried, dead flowers, each one residing on its who doily, and on one of the- walls was a collection of ornamental plates and dishes, each decorated with a large colorized kitten all different colors with ribbons around their neck.

These were so foul that, Naddalin stared at them, gored until Professor Scott spoke again.

‘Good evening,’ Mr. Naddalin started looking around… at the wonder around her, she- had not noticed her at first sight, because she- was wearing an explicitly flowered set of robes that blended only too well with the- tablecloth on the- desk behind her.

‘Evening, Professor Scott,’ Naddalin said stiffly.

‘Well, sit down,’ she’d- said, pointing towards a small table draped in lace beside which she’d- had drawn up a straight-backed chair. A piece of blank parchment lay on the- table, apparently waiting for her to pen.

‘Er,’ said Naddalin, without moving.’ Professor Scott. Er- before we start, I- I wanted to ask you a… a favor.’

Her bulging eyes narrowed her nose.

A feeling of great gloom in the castle, Naddalin pulled she- door open.

On the- threshold stood Aunt Marge. She’d- was very like Uncle Read: large, beefy, and all shit-faced, she’d- even had a fuzziness in places you don’t

want fuzz-ie-ness-NESS-ness, though not as bushy as she.

In one hand, she'd- held an enormous suitcase, and tucked under the- other was old and evil-tempered, that held a beast, that was turned into just that over the fact that he was mean, nasty, and greatly to all young girls in the land- think they were not good enough for him, this was done- by one of the fallen angels- who study dark witchcraft, 20 years ago- back or so, for not wanting her hand, like the others that were sweet and innocent young ladies, or for not going to the ball with her, was the real reason, all us girls still tease him and one another about.

Dariez came waddling down the- hall, with her blond hair plastered flat to her forehead, a bow above just visible she

forgot to take out before showering- she was baring as the day she was born, show all that makes her a girl. We all slapped our hand to our forehead hard, saying she's a girl- is she not, all-it was anonymous- even if pre-pubescent.

Aunt Marge thrust the- suitcase into Naddalin's old room dragging this girl body with her, knowing she- wind up just running out, all the same, Dariez in a tight one-armed hug, rain from me, and planted a large kiss on my cheek, 5 minutes or so after being in my old room.

Naddalin knew perfectly well, that Dariez only put up with these hugs because, she knew what it was like reading about sisters, that did not get along, in her studies, and with Karly, and her past, and sure enough, when they broke apart, Dariez had note clutched fist,

saying add this to your story. It said- ‘I want to be one of you…’

…And Jennath!

Aunt Marge, then shouted, saying get off her and get dressed, striding past Naddalin as though she- was the coolest girl she ever knew, like a hero.

Aunt Marge and Aunt Jennath kissed us, in our rush, for bed, as we all dispersed the room, Dariez bumped her small jaw against, my chin, saying see yah.

Uncle Read now came in, smiling enthusiastically as he- shut the- door, saying, night kids.

(They did have their good moments I'm thought.)

…And Tea for me, Marge, they said in the nook together, in soft light,

stars out the windows. And she- said, how she loved him and all those things that sound romantic.

~*~

And the kitten can have some milk out of my saucer, here…

Then said Aunt Marge as they all proceeded into her- for a midnight snack around 3:00 a.m. into the kitchen, leaving Naddalin alone in the- hall with the- suitcase, she wants to be there, for the night- remembering all that is the past.

Nevertheless, Naddalin wasn't complaining; any excuse not to be with Aunt Marge was fine by her- when she knew that she was all cuddle with him, 'yuck-ie'- she thought, so she- began to head back into the- case doorway under the stairs her spare bedroom, taken as

long as she- could, peeping at them all yet trying her not too.

In her room under the stars… I think about Emmah… I start thinking about all the PDA she and I have had, I LOVE HER- we love feeling our-selves pleased by and one another pleasure well-making lust-love. (I love licking pussy.) I am rolling around, in bed nude, feeling the sheets, holding myself as if it was to her, mumbling- in the thought of my knotty… mind.

She slips her hands under her blue rob, under her see throw panties with the bow in the front, and her body spasms and slackens and she cups her small, breasts with her nipples start to point upward, in her hands and feels the hard pearls of her nipples, like tiny

mysteries- long to be played with by in her mind

Emmah hand and tongue, against the barked palms of his hands.

She puts her hands under her knees and maneuvers carefully, so that her bottom rests on the edge of the bed. She slips her fingers underneath the worn elastic of her panties that are strung across the points of her hips and lower lips, she feels the slow winding down of her dying heart and can see a bluish tinge thriving on her skin of her through her thin robe, and smoothed hair, as she goes in. then, slips them to her ankles and softly draws apart her knees and feels again a watery ardor… in her eyes, she starts tearing up… It is exactly as he imagined it - the hair feeling, the lips feeling, the whole feeling - and she slips

her hands under her butt after, saying- I MISS HER, now I feel gross and need a shower I'm all sweaty- o-wh-a, as she looks at her hand cover in cummie.

'I wanted to kiss her in my mind forever- though in my moment. I blocked out all thought that was not about her, what it might mean, what further mess I might create for myself... knew, And I kissed a pillow like it was her until reason seeped out through my pores, and I became a living throb with-in throbs, mindful only of what I wanted to do to her and myself if it would be her doing it... And suddenly we were crashing around the little railway carriage in my mind… and this is where my fantasy took place, all hands and lips and, oh, God, the scent and taste and feel of her. It was like tiny fireworks going off all over me, as I gushed, bits of me... looking for her to

find the same way. -I- I’s enjoy her so much with we are together in lusting love and just finding a new thing to discover with each other- mind-body- and fallen soul too.’

By the- time I’s- got back to the- kitchen, Aunt Marge had been slurping up all tea should take down, and very sleepy she could not even speak clearly, with the cat napping noisily in her- corner. Naddalin saw Aunt Jennath wince slightly as specks of tea and dribbled clean floor, from her mouth. Aunt Jennath hated animals, like our kitten Buttons, who is the cutest lovable thing ever.

Uncle Read asked, why I was tip-toeing through the kitchen- afterward, in a see-through robe- that was so sharp I don’t even know why- I’s bother putting it back on- well that what he said- anyways-

why even bother when you can see it all. ‘Oh, Jeez-us…’ I said holding myself- like a girl… in a moment of shyness. I was not expecting anyone to be here at this hour.

-And-

Buttons began to snore again as Naddalin sat down, looking through her notes that she was editing for the upcoming classes- in her blue night rob. She directed Aunt Marge’s attention to Naddalin for the- first time, as she was wheezing as well, and then jolted to alertness, the lantern over there head was dancing with its flickering flame, it was an old railroad 1909 Pa. lantern that Uncle read live light to set a feel and ambiance, this one works- the one that is in my room is on that I fund next to the tracks years ago, walking the abandoned line back into the woods going north, it’s

all bent and missing some glass, yet, I love it for I knew, that it was here's- the girl from the story, and something that has been passed down through the years. 'Sometimes, I don't like coming back here and then, sometimes I do to remember…'

He looked at me dragging on his pipe looking far too familiar to me in my mind, yet I could not remember why- then he said: 'I remember summer mounts were always- like this… nothing ever really changes.' I started feeling sad, and was tearing up… I was seeing a vision of the past of what looked like a grandfather, who was a railroad worker, in the cast of gold replacing him, with a halo light around him in glowing lights, saying- 'don't forget about me- too,' he was in his 1920's hat that was always tilted to the one side, and that white smile, so vivid it was eerie.

-And-

So… I thought- what does it mean?

And she’d- meowed… and it snapped me out of the trance, that I was in, and still in there, are parts of you, even now, as I held a note, of his and now her too, part of life never changes there just passed on and down to new- ones just like you. So, the moral of this always that we're not that far apart in how we look act and do things, even if… 100- years of Rhetoric was spacing us apart more than me, we still all together, linked by handwritten text.

All just notes, yet have so much meaning, just a memory, of life to some would not matter to me it’s everything.

-And-

(Fare of in another small village is Emmah- feeling the same ways.)

Emmah- ‘‘I am a hopeless romantic,’ and then I thought about that, and she said to me- ‘you’re not hopeless anymore, you have me, to show your sweet romantic too without the hopelessness.’

This is why… I love- Naddalin so-o much.’

(Back)

Yes, said Naddalin of course, they have to care about me all along, even if gone.

And do not you say- ‘yes’ in that ungrateful tone?

I can do this… I will add to the story; I will do that… I'm well- DO- THAT!

(For a girl that knows nothing about nothing- I’s sure did something!)

~*~

And It is damn good to Reading and Jennath to keep you, I thought too and them knowing all that I just did, yet I am a girl, I feel so guilty in all that I do- even feeling like a woman- not a little girl as they think, even Dariez needs to feel like a woman now and then- more like every other day, and us seeing yet you get my drift.

Why?

Why… did I always feel guilty for feeling good?

Wouldn’t have it myself any other way than this- is what makes me creative.

He said to me- ‘You’d have gone straight to an orphanage if you’d been

dumped on my doorstep, you- little cute fuzzball of girlie-ness, how could- I- say- no, and he was squeezing my left cheek?’

(Like- I said, there were some good moments.)

-And-

Naddalin was overflowing full, on cookies and milk, to say that she’d rather live here than back the orphanage that Kristen was once in, with the- Sleyashs she was safe and warm, but she- thought of she- Claepsiara, Skoufyceol of Wizardry form years not- stopped so they- said ‘okay-’ and that was your girlfriend is so-o for you to be happy then okay, sorry for what you go thought- he said. She- forced a face into a painful smile, saying thanks, I think he meant it. It was a nice long talk-in the we-e-e hours in the morning.

I thought about and assumed- ‘I would be happy to play with her all my life, in a way why are best of playmates, aren’t we?’

I was smirk at me, in the mirror as I do to her face to face, I was standing bare! And then Aunt Marge looked in at me and shut the door fast see my butt cheeks, and the look on my face reflecting, in the mirror she could see Emmah the same way looking at her love stuck.

~*~

And, just like that a week went by and I was snapped back to the old train station where I was back at the school… ripped from reality…

This was a happing while- Then the door to my room busted open yet

again, one of the girls, that I have to share the house with- kind of like a sister yet not, that shall remain nameless- saw me just like fad into a cloud of ashy dust, and magical vague of wispiness, as I vanished before her eyes. ‘Besides, I can see you haven’t improved since I last saw you, is what he said to me. I hoped your meatal school would knock some manners into you, that what they think- in more ways than one.’

Did not even get to say goodbye to Aunt and Uncle, who was still sipping on their tea out in the kitchen, as I was being ripped into this distortion of time, I could hear the large gulp of tea, whispers, about me and the other girls in the house yet most about me.

Good things… more than anything- yet, it made me sad.

~*~

Besides she'd- took a look and blinked- and blinked yet, once more-, and said- shit… and then went back out into the dim flickering light that's making a soft warm glow in the kitchen, where she asked if they were sending Naddalin away yet again. And if so if she was gone or not yet, and if she had a full-size poster in her room of herself, 'why do you ask me this, child?'

I think I just saw her disappear… if that was not a photo of her… it makes no scents.

-And-

St. Brutus's said Uncle Read promptly- said 'if she not here then she is there- little one.'

And- It’s a first-rate institution for hopeless cases.

-And-

I see, said Aunt Marge. Do they use these at St. Brutus’s, girl, and she held up with looked like quail feather in the little hand, and a wand in the other, with a sapphire stone that was heart-shaped at the holding side? She must not have needed it or left it for- Dariez who wants so much to be just like her, she tried to snap it over her knees yet, it would not break.

‘Go give it to her now then…’ he said austerely, as it started to glow and change color in the stone, and read her name with-in the crystal of the wand that was silver.

She thought it across her wood desk, to her while up in her room, in the home.

‘I remember her saying that this was not needed yet some cool to have to show your cleverness, skill, ability, and talent levels along with power, and a story for a young girl like me…’ said Dariez, and her eyes sparkling with wonder and the possibilities of the phenomenon if her mind could just unlock it using magic, and this start girl wound, or become a girl that has fallen too.

-Then-

I- Dariez, was looking through, her room I was- me myself and I that is, and I wound fount it- I knew that she would have one of these, I just knew it, a glass sprier small that was big for her small hands- crystal ball- that would show

all my days, it leads me to find this book in the restricted parts of the abandoned town 1898 built library… that is next to caving in… I knew that I would have to go in find sneaking out late at night, tonight- looking in the glass I saw, the story of a girl, that looks all too alike to me, it was showing a very dark past of a young girl's life, like a video- showing a hanging and bullying, of a girl that was a copy of me, it looks… yet, the question I had was- WHY? And it was saying that death was the only way out… was it me- was it… I am the girl in the glass its showing… I need to find more… and this book was it like it had a bewitching power over me I had too, it the copy. It also said I have everything I need to be a fallen angel if I believe- if I believe in the power of white magic.

Looking in the book of all her day's past, here is something that just

seemed to appear right in front of my eyes, hidden text between the lines, of the lines, on the old tattered yellowing pages, there read a line of words reviling hidden secrets of her life and home village. It was faint in color gray in the style of her gorgeous script penmanship; around the text was magical whiskers- that would glow in shades of gold- sparkly- about and around the lettering, it said as I read aloud: ‘Nevaeh hometown was the longest little town in the Earthy world, this was a clue- for those that need to know, and to see only if they should- or believed in her of was someone like her.’

-And-

Then, I looked even deeper and say a girl- it was me with white wings… blink at me, ever so sweetly- and angelic.

Er - Uncle Read nodded curtly behind Aunt Marge's back, saying- 'oh no- another one.'

As she ran to her room whooshing it around, saying nonconical worlds… hoping for it to do something, need like lighting her daddy- Read's shorts a-flam, or give him two heads, or get out of choirs and homework, know ideas of yet what magic could do and how dark it could be.

And Yes, And said Naddalin, on the phone to her saying- 'shh don't say anything and next year, I can bring you here, yet a girl that is not like me-' 'BUT' she said- trying to understand her dark side deeper with curiosity in her voice, Naddalin was looking down on her and knew along she was in her old room, and again she said- Sh-h, don't become like

me- stay good, magic is more playful that way.’

-And-

Excellent… she screamed, And Aunt Marge rushed in the room thought she was being murdered. A good spanking is what this girl needs for what they thought was a good beating in her room with her things, is what’s ninety-nine days out of a hundred, without TV and fun or seeing others, for being in her doing things that little girls should not. Have you been beaten by something or did you do this to yourself, look at these cuts' slashes on her like fang marks? And in this room under the steps, she was looked too just like Naddalin for being bad.

-And-

Oh, yeah, said Naddalin, she loads of times, she said this to Emmah saying this girl needs out of this environment and some normal girlfriends. Unanimously she agreed.

Aunt Marge narrowed her eyes, saying- ‘you bastard, you don’t need to be that cruel about a little girl being a young woman.’

‘Oh, is that what you call it, he said.’

‘She’s just a little girl…’

‘She is playing around with her stuff… like that evil wand looking for sinful, that is enough, the magic she calls it, I call it sick temptations, that I like the holy further would banish her to hell for, if she did not confess too, and she will not then I will look her in there with it until

she sees the real evil she is looking for, as the holy further said to do.'

'She's just a little girl…' she said, throwing her hands up walking away… and like- her, I feel it not evil, and it is just magic, and even not so as you with your dirty mind- there no harm in what she is doing in there, if so-o.

'And I still do not like your tone, little girl,' he said, hold the holy book- that he never read yet wants to think he has, saying this is what you need to know- 'she looked up saying- I do know it more than you- unlike you and what you think of me, I can read, and I was chosen and you were not…'

Blink- Blink, is what he did… at his child.

‘What the hell- does that mean?’ He said, slamming the door in the girl’s face.

She glanced down at the glass once more and it said- ‘TRUST-

IS FOR SMALL GIRLS AND GOD!’

Yet she trusted her…

She trusted Naddalin…

Lakemont

Naddalin- then she'd- said like- like, if you can speak of your beatings, to other or they will get worse and the mom has no say in at all its all power by the daddy, in that casual way, they aren't hitting you hard enough, to understand that, said Emmah, then Naddalin said that is why- the of why, no question in it, I am bringing her back with us next year, she can take any more of this abuse.

Both walked down all the spiral staircases, with all these pips that follow up and round to make the sounds, that leads to the vast entryway to the castle, main door- were the largest player piano, was pumping out tunes, from the 20's made of wood, also charmed, it has glass doors and drum and things playing to the beats.

Like in the hall, as I said there is this ornate pipe organ, and in the basement, I have been down there, there all these rooms that look nuts that runs it all, with air ballot's, old belts, next to old medieval things, like more artillery then I have ever been near - nickelodeons, old cone operated fortunetelling machines, and things like that- more than- like- I have ever seen, and haunted dancing bones, on chains hanging from a chain, form the accused in the past, in the dungeons rooms after room, that tunnel after pass away, all light with gas torches, drip-p-y and wet are the stone walls cold to the touch, a mass grave in one that, is restricted to girls like me even, yet I have seen.

-Then-

Jennath overlooking us- jumping into the conversation late, I'd write if I were you, I did more than that, I want you to 'please' make it clear that you approve of this little girl- along with all the other older girls, and younger to that she needs friends, love, and understanding more than anything, she's is not used to girl's, that do that, along with falling in love with the wonders of all that is magic.

Perhaps Uncle Read was worried, that Naddalin might forget their bargain; in any case, she- changed the- subject abruptly, for the little girl, she was in her mind, like a haunting eerie whisper saying- Sh-h and stop,' this was never-ever part of the bargain to still his child away, yet she was going to do just that, it doesn't pay she thought to be a- meanie- to girls that can't stand up for themselves, over being too young- yet this girl has a

voice, yet no authority yet, that will change- it well.

Have you heard the- news this morning, Marge? What about that escaped individual? Eh- more of the same she said, softly, in a low tone of voice.

As Aunt Marge started to make herself at home, with all drama of young little ones, no-longer in rebellion anarchism to her say, and not getting along among themselves- when it was just down to the one, and the other was staying over at friends' homes within the villages, Naddalin caught herself thinking almost unrequitedly of life in dorm number four-teen without them, with her Emmah and the 4 other's, that would be in this room with her, this year duration, Naddalin made the request- very early to

share a room with her- her being Emmah of course.

Uncle Read and Aunt Jennath usually encouraged the little girl to stay out of there way, in times of play and times of not, which Naddalin was only too happy to do for her using a spell to stay linked into her mind as long as she felt the need too, until the day she could get away, and stay with them.

Aunt Marge, on the- other hand, wanted this girl under her eyes at all times, so that she'd- could boom out suggestions for the improvement, without getting slapped about, in my thought that not better than. Her dad's word was law… all this over just having some things in my room that find sinful, and her being a wondrous girl.

She’d- delighted in acquiring, her magical background with Naddalin the sooner the better, Dariez is, Naddalin even took huge pleasure in buying Dariez expensive presents while getting glaring, when they were sent back home for a home to open in front of them.

As though daring her mom and dad to ask, the girl to say- to them all why they hadn’t got a present, saying I am the chosen one. She’d- also kept throwing out dark hints her studies in all that is enchanted, magical, fairy-tale and charmed, and about what made them all such unsatisfactory entities to her now.

You mustn’t blame yourself for the- way the- girl turned out, Read, after all, she is so looking up to her, and we took her in after all, and she is making our children bad, with her sinful ways of

looking for darkness. And If there’s something rotten on the- inside of this child for the I well beat it out before she sees to doing herself, there’s nothing anyone can do about it, I will punish her for this sin…!

Dariez, asked if she could have a girlfriend over for a sleepover, and if she would- stay over, for lunch on her- the third day of this week if she stopped all the madness and went back to looking emotionless, Dariez thought that she was falling too them and what they wanted, when it was all my plain, for her to back down, as I took over her mind, she has everything she needs now, with inside of her to be a brilliant magician, and then a white angel, and from there I have a feeling, yet that is only if she believes in herself- more then I believe in her- and them too.

-And-

Naddalin tried to concentrate on her food, in the large hall with the many stained glass arch windows, but her hands shook and her face was starting to burn with anger, saying this little girl can’t keep going on.

Remembering the- form, she- told herself, to get them to autograph, and that it was not for her, it was giving up the welfare of Dariez, and he did- to me, I am taking her, the moron did not remember that I was brought to him from here, think about Emmah- The Claepsiara, Hayvannahol for younger girls and Skoufyceol for the older girls of both Wizardry and Fallen Angel’s. Do not say anything, there was a whoosh- as they did a teleport spell, and they were both

there... standing before them in the living room.

Do not rise, she said along with - ‘I AM HERE FOR THE GIRL, TO KEEP!’

Aunt Marge reached for her glass of wine. ‘It’s one of the- basic rules of breeding, and she- said, to keep your child, and teach your child as you feel fit.’

‘What gives you the right, after we took your filth in?’

It all played out like this to the rest of the world, yet when really, I was taking here...

Dariez- I am running- running- through the park, at night, misty fog, haunted like an amusement park, and I am at a place called Lakemont, it's somewhere in Pa, and was the place to be, for all that was cheap thrills...

I got the idea from a book I read that is called: LAKEMONT, I am standing at the top of 1902 the Lep the Deeps 60' Roller Coaster- the oldest in the world, that if you miss a step you'll fall to your death, it's all wood and rickety, white and splintery, rusty chains, and old heavy wooden cars lush padded ripped of leather seats, that have not moved in years and big rusty cogs, raining hard, everything eerie having a green cast, and all the light the sky is thunderbolts, see all the rides…

I walked through the hunted like- old Noah's ark- now stopped just rocked to the one side. I would say this is not what you would call a holly place of fun- even if that what was intended, more like a nasty sin, the floor completely gone, had to jump from place to place; yet no one

was stopping me, from doing so-o there were no signs up stopping me.

Yee- and whooping sound no longer. Yes, I could recall them in my consciousness, Noah is at the top look more sadistic than ever, most of all the cars on the Ferris wheel is rusted and just hang, on one pin.

Ah- the large carousel, that once played sweet soothing music seems to be playing in my mind as I pass the ride- seeing young faces with amusement, now most of the houses are total, entirely, fully, and wholly gone or tagged with race and slurs, or ingrates- on the eyes or the house was stabbed out.

The crock skew stands naked and eerie in the dense fog hugging low, and the right high lost color. The water park looks like a swamp, the water slides from

hell, like that one at Disney, yet you would make that jump. There are many ways, that I could kill myself… many… the light bulbs smashed on the ride singes, chipped animal rusted, faded, yet in my mind there bright and flashing. The train sets, never to steam again… track missing in some places where it used to snack through the tree cover and over rivers, old buildings now really falling, even if they were made to look like that before.

The whip- ride had its roof blow on in a tornado, years back.

The costar has a dibble dip, and the cars live the station from the first hill on like any before it. There is a jail over the way, where you could pretied, where they would sell Harlan, back in the days when I was just a child. ‘The Rollo Costar’ had killed a 3-year-old boy- and to the life

of a boy, that wanted to live on like I-Dariez, the boy was sitting on a younger girl's lap, and they said, that was all they need to shut this park down forever- to never- ever- ever be opened once more.

The Swan boat's all half sunk-looking like shout ducks, in the swap, that is yellow, that was a once a crystal-clear lagoon. Um- it was said the park was hexed, over the years with all the deaths, that took place here, on the rids one ride unparticular the Skyliner COSTAR. The log ride stationary forever, parts of it laying on the ground beneath. Storybook frost, liking like the bible stories from hell. The paratrooper ride is locked to the lift, rusty, red, white, and blue. The white picket wood fence is no-longer, the walkway mud.

The Caterpillar ride, I remember as a kid covering me over, and I was afraid of the dark. Along with the chair swing ride, the wooden seats gone, the meatal oxidized, corroded, and eroded chains sawing in the breeze, like haunted arms- of something satanic. The trolley still sitting in the main street, street light, with cracked glass… dead trees, dark brown, with what look to be armed hanging down want to pick you up and eat you… that was beautiful at one time- all whipping willow-ie.

Falling apart like me on the inside, it all the same forgotten, all the old buildings, falling, I saw when trespassing to get up here to my child hold happiness, and like the coaster, I am feeling the same. It is so hard to talk when you want to kill yourself, over losing a girlfriend.

That’s in the air and beyond the whole shebang else of things, and it’s not a mental complaint that I have, it’s a physical thing like it’s physically hard to open your mouth and make the words come out, and they will not.

They don’t come out smooth and in unification with your brain the way normal people’s words do; I don’t get why, they come out in chunks as if from a crushed ice machine, like a piss snow-con you know the lemon one that no one likes, yet, if your dump like me you get for you can make up your mind on anything but the girl you can never-ever-never-ever have; you blunder on them as they gather behind your lower lip with your upper teeth.

So-o you just keep silent, hushed, and soundless, yet your brain never-ever-ever shut the freak up.

‘Have you ever saw how on all the ads on TV, people are watching TV?’ My friend is like. ‘Pass it, child,’ my other acquaintance is like. ‘No, yo-o- yo, that’s true,’ my other - another friend is like- like- um- ah- and- uh. ‘There’s always somebody on a coach unless it’s an allergy ad and they’re in a field… blah- blah- hem and hum- poop- fart, and giggle.’

‘Or on a horse- with a creepy man looking too sexy for a man or a donkey- going He-ha- or some dip-shit biting a winey in the middle, or some re-tard-ed pig going we-ee-ee-ee.’ This would be the year of 2019 on Earth, funny now I want a pinwheeled too. ‘Those ads are always for

herpes, then the men- man, and the woman with the burning itchy feeling down under, that has- vagina-night-us.'

Amusement, and joy. 'How do you even tell somebody you have that, and it all for crap?' That's Kristopher… It's his house. 'That must be such a weird tête-à-tête: 'Hey, before we do this, you should know…'

'Your moms didn't mind last night?' 'Oh-ha!'

'Girl!'

NO- NO- NO…

(One week back)

(Week back)

…Before Dariez turned 14…

Kristopher lobs a punch at her, the antagonist. Richard is small and

wears jewelry, some like me think he is gay, and will not say. He once told me, Dariez, when a man puts on his first piece of jewelry, there's no turning back, with all that is Faggish, yet that is live her in the halls.

Richard shakes his wrist and turns his attention to the pot. He punches back with his hand with the big limp silver bracelet on it; it hits Kristopher's watch, clanging. 'Son, what you trying to do with my gold, yo?' Balm streaks outline his light switch, and his bedsheet is pocked with black circles. There's always a pot at Kristopher's house; he has a room with a separate ventilation system and a lockable door that his parents could rent out an additional apartment.

There are stains on there, too, shimmery stains that show certain

activities, that take place between Kristopher and his girlfriend. I personally for one look at them (the stains, then the duo). I'm jealous… yah- nah-some- But then again, I'm beyond jealous, more them enough- of it all.

'Dariez?' 'You want?'

I'm seeing if maybe pot is the problem; maybe that's what has come in and mugged me. I do this every so often, for a few weeks, and then I smoke a lot of pot, just to test if maybe, like the nonexistence of it is what has stolen from me. It's passed to me, enfolded up in a concise conveyance scheme, nonetheless, I pass it on. I'm doing a trial with my brain- like have a 3-some with it.

'You, all right?'

This should be my name. I could be a superhero: You All

Right girl.

‘Ah…’ I stumble.

‘Don’t bug Dariez,’ Richard is like. ‘He’s in the Dariez zone.

He’s Dariez-ing out.’

‘Yeah.’ I move the muscles that make me smile. ‘I’m just… kind of- you know…’

Do you see how the words work? They betray your mouth and walk away.

She has big eyes… ‘Are you okay?’ Emmah asks, oh by the way that was her name. Emmah is Kristopher’s girlfriend, here on here on Earth so there is no weird about how it looks. She’s in bodily contact with Kristopher at all times

Emmah I know is Bi-curious. Right now, she's on the floor next to his leg, wrapped around her and I know that Naddalin is not liking it- by the grin she has to force on her face.

'I'm fine,' I tell her- about this. The blue glow of the flat-screen TV in front of us ricochets off her eyes as she turns back to it. We're watching a nature special on the deep ocean, about a 14-year-old girl lost in a boat she made to become remember, after a boyfriend dropped her, and is eaten by sharks.

I was engrossed in the story holding behind their backs- Emmah's hand that is behind him that were holding hands in front.

~*~

Emmahlyn

(The narration started saying-)

I am just a girl…

My age: 14-

My name is Emmahlyn Marilee,

I have been called the small girl and also just called Emmah as a nickname, yet I am just a girl, but even so-o, I had a crazy thought, and dream to be the first girl younger than a woman to do what I set off to do and at something that has never done.

There I was day after day making my ship- nothing big, yet it was what I thought was right to make this journey, I have lived mostly on the water growing up-in my home-town next to the port.

‘Yes- how’s it coming my day asked looking at me like I was the nuts girl.’

‘Good!’- I say, not even looking up at him, to see that he was just wearing those- whole-ie underwear that- are like yellow from age wiped at the elastic. who was sipping on his coffee, he no I was doing this with or without his okay?

§

I remember taking a bite of my PP and J sandwich and having half of it running down my tank top, which was pink, that smalt of kiddie girl perfume. The kind that all the young girls spray too much of in the locker rooms after the Liz-bo teacher wants to look at you run laps. There goes the dog running after my sister who is 2 years young then I, and then the dog, that missed the step and hit the wall, yet I did not even look up I was working on my wooden boat for my sea trip I was going to make all by myself!

Hometown too… they- or no one was going to stop me from making my make in the world. I wanted fame! And to be the strong girl!

I battle my way off the coastline- on a clear day, there is no motor, no life jacket, no nothing just me in a small boat doing a big dream.

Yah, I am normal, this is what a girl does on her summer break…

Lost at sea in a small yeah- where I end up in one of the worst events of my life, tossing and turning over waves, I think I am going to die, 30-foot waves on I go under, and over the boat was never made to stand be crashed, and bobbing like a cork in the 5,000-foot waters of the sea.

Black is all I see, for 24 nights as I try to make it a- coursed the Pacific alone, a dumb thing I just want to see if I could do- to make history, lost at sea it's day 5 after I left the port of my small town- I have no clue what was to come- some would say it was poor planning- others say it was just dumb. I had nothing but a camera to talk to and I did I documented my story- I was taunted by sharks- they were nipping at my feet.

Happiness, I can even think of the good thought other than the flashbacks of the life I had and let go for this trip- to become someone- when I was… somebody there- with them- I think of all them in my mind- and I get even more broken hatred adrift lost in the ocean? nothing is something I do not have at this time I feel that not seeing my mom and dad is slowly killing me more than living her bobbing in

the water having sharks swimming around me just looking at me with the intent to eat.

My happiness was being home, and being with my girlfriend on the weekend, and spending time with my young boyfriend too, whom I broke up with me right before this trip, I miss- oh so much. He was everything to me… maybe that is why, I did this… to show him that I am a strong girl, and don't need him- yet right now lessons am so sure that I do.

My greatest fear is as of now, being eaten alive by them swimming around me. Not getting back home never seeing my friends and family, never doing something like homework, or reading a book, or texting on my phone, things that we take for granted.

Things that you don't even think of every day- things like being warm and dry. Things like sitting with your dad- eating like a pig and farting well looking at the TV, waterfall-like mom saying you're not nice to your sister who looks up to you those things- there. I fear everything out here in this dark water- that is so cool and become, hot as hell, the sun has my skin- pilling and red, then at night it feels like knives are hitting all the open wounds that their sharp teeth have made on my legs and feet, passing by.

Death- I feel that I am eating my own body away, as they nibble away at it too… I see the light get odd and stranger… too. The Loneliness', is getting to me, there is no one for miles… there is not one soul to take to- and all my photo-

phone- and life has washed away in the boat that is not at the bottom of the sea.

A while That is now like green from the blonde, color. My eyes are red from the saltwater running in as I have high waves crashing over my head. I know I am seeing things, that are not even there, I feel dazed.

What is the trait you most deplore in others? Him the only thing right now that I could think of hating the most right now is him… everything, I dislike the world for me ending up this way even God too… why did this big storm have to come, why did I have to sink, why? bit

Pounding the nose- hit- hit- slap- and she went off, yet getting one of my toes, the big one… I can see fragments of my little boat around me yet nothing to

keep me from going under to hold on to. Um- I remember the first date we went on to a fast food place, not much of it was what he had, his mom and dad did not get- US! I NEVER HAD A ring he did not have the money- yet no looking back on slowly sucking in my saltwater then I can handle, I feel he was never- ever the real one.

Oh him- so dreamy- yet so- uncaring about me- the person, I would admire the most more than my dad would be-the boy I love- and yet also said for me to grow up, and be someone, other than a whiny little b*tch, and find someone else to love, even if… is the? Him for loving me- always him- my boyfriend for being my first… and taking me- and taking me wherever I wanted to like the mall and to school and a football game, to the park for rides and more, or in his car for

loving, and even hooking up and making out he was the one for me. With his dark hair and perfect smile, lips and face, green eyes. I was his short blonde, slim, and slander, hopping into his arms when he said when, or to jump and- I said - like ‘how high,’ we feed off of each- other’s feeling and caring.

My greatest extravagance was going to be this and make to the other side where he would be there for me to jump into his arms- it was not even three days, and my body was not even consumed complete, by these sharks he was with: Amy Pierre- the girl that was cuter than me- and better than me in everything? He could care less that I became shark poop, and that not fun because that is true, these were my last thoughts, pin and left to float out in see in a bottle. Funny a day at the beach three

weeks after they gave up looking for me his new girlfriend, read this… and freaked!

Part: 1

I am- Going-

Cr-a-zzz-y- crazy- CRAZ-YYYY!

My short life is running past me- and I can help but to have foggy thoughts of all the days in the past and thought of a life with my boyfriend that not going to have- or working, or job, or dances, or car… or sweet 16. Even babies- and that white dress! I am just treading water- eating- whatever just to sub-stain life- and keep from shriveling up… to black dust in the hot sun- too really cool 17º nights.

If a boat is close, I would star call out yet there was nothing but my cold breath echoing back in my face, to show

my I WAS ALL ALONE- facing death, but then more loudly, I played myself out until I had no power left in my voice, I lost, and I was a cheerleader in school, for 2 years, the lost lonely thoughts of cold- no one is come to get you.

Trying to stay as still as possible, and while waiting, trading, yeah- no- they're going to pull you under and rip you apart… I was there a new toy- the shark was my pet- should I pet it or let it eat me? - as long as the shark is not actively attacking you - and get into the boat as quickly as possible once the boat reaches you. 'This life expectancy that I have lived is full of trials with misfortunes, yet I only 14- so-o you have to capture humor whenever and wherever you can find it.' And mine was to have this… I recall the first three hours in the boat before all the lights went out it was

nice and I thought, I had it in the bag. Maybe it's important to open up I people, other than a boy and some close girlfriends- people who are right there with you, not some thousand miles away in another life. Or maybe it's something else. Maybe, I should just settle for not knowing, that I would not be for anything. Maybe it's just good to know that you're not the only one who doesn't know, what she perfect wanted.

I made the boat myself; I was something that I was most proud of… blue and white- it was made to have no power on board- just to make the 100-day journey for one cost to the other- from Norfolk to Freeport- and over the triangle. That was also called dumb- knowing the stories- of what if. 90 mph and more, with the winds… I thought this

was it- I say my good buys- I have nothing but the camera to say this all too.

§

My current state of mind? Irrational, there goes my other leg, I feel down, and there is nothing- nothing- nothing- my mind can't take this… I shriek- yell- scream, and cry- and there is no sound- just more water coming from my eyes, and I am gushing blood and the choppy waves are now inflamed with the color of ruby red, I will never feel what it's like to have a boy there either the dirty thought run in my crazing mind, that my hip was hardly hanging on the rest of me. But do you feel sorry for me- know you should not- I was over my head… from the first five moments. All over a dumb boy- and his- mean.

What do you consider the most overrated virtue? Thinking they care about me my friends are they, my friends, why did I have to do this alone, why has no one found me, these are all question asked after the first five hours into this trip, I did not plane long enough. Was there a plan not really more just a spite Victoria Secret…?

And- like a dumb girl going for something never done. Have I been a liar and a cheat? I would sneak out with the girls, and blame my sister for what I did, that being a teen… and I would play with the skittle too is that why I am her for loving myself… and say that I did not- is that God says don't, why I end up this why- he made me feel that I need to touch myself down there and I did more than six times one day it that wrong? He would get me, to do him like every other day, yet

a teen girl wants more. Like I remember the first time he grabbed my boobs, oh that was so nice, now I feel that I will never feel love… again even if I do make it out- alive- I have no lower half…!

I remember last year my nose was bigger than them- I just got an ass and now a shark has come and bit it off- just my luck… I was going crazy… Always to cover for what was right, even if it was wrong it was to make sure the other person was not said. I also kissed another boy on the lips in front of him think I would get him back, is God paying me back for it now?

I was always prep type- even appearance, with the little poof on my head and wavy heavy blonde hair; everything I was a girl in high school there was nothing about me that I

thought was right, I wanted it all fixed like my nose and that was done 2 years back like my teeth and when I started wearing way too much makeup to cover it all up- yet I one of the top looking girls in my class or so they said.

5 days in all I have is a bit of wet candy bar… and I take the last bite of my favorite snake food. The boat was going under fast; my electronics have all gone. It was not long until; I say now- that not testing my work in small boat making was not up to ship shape. I could say that now…

‘There is a magnificent intensity in life that comes when we are not in control but are only reacting, living, surviving. I am not a religious man per see… but for me, to go to sea is to get a glimpse of the face of God. At sea, I have

reminded of my insignificance of all men's insignificance. It is a wonderful feeling to be so humbled.’

§

My dilemma has given me a strange kind of wealth; I will always be remembered for the dumb ass girl that did this… the most important kind of remembrance there is was dumb in life. You do something so dumb you be remembered, maybe that was why I tried this… he said I was that dumb, so I lived up to it! I value each moment that is not spent in pain, desperation, hunger, thirst, or loneliness.

Sometimes, I try to stop speculating about the future or what’s out of my existence, and other times I just lean back and run with it because maybe

it's for the best, to think of what might not have been that what could have been.

Larger days into my trip and I lost at sea, so far out in the back seat, at night, Sharks are playing with my feet- not taking bits, yet, but like rubbing me as they pass… were- ‘I’m just confused. Everything’s confusing. Everything beautiful is far away, or maybe everything far away is beautiful. It’s like how the grass is greener on the other side. Grass just looks nicer from the other side; you know? The grass where you’re standing looks like dirt with hair.’

Well anyone finds me or will I die?

‘A strange thing happens when you interview a robot. You feel an urge to be profound: to ask profound questions. I suppose it’s an inter-species thing.

Although if it is, I wonder why I never try and be profound around my dog. 12:07 am lost at sea- in the greenish-blueish blue in the drink- ‘Like a planet around a star,’ looking up, I see the shooting one and no that is my death coming.

I am weigh surrounded by a display of natural wonders, all glowing in with the moonlight. All sparkly- in the calculation, to the little ecosystem developing around me, was taking skin and more of me my- and my top and underwire were taken off by me, so it would not weight me down- so-o here I am, bobbing in the drink just nude as I was with my boyfriend the first time, I have the same turn-in upside-ie- down-ie feeling in my little belie. Look down and it’s amazing all the colors and life- yet tariffing all at the same time- so wonderful and yet so unkind to me.

The acrobatic dorados perform beneath ballets of fluffy white clouds. Then the sunsets were just like the one I would sit and stare at with him making me sad and happy too. Or the time I went for ice-cream with my dad, and he gives me money for my first, bike… when I was five. Or the time, I was with my mom and sister, Gracie, walking out to the waterfall in the state park, at ten. And the time with my boy, over a table overlooking the sea- at belief restraint place that his mom paid for.

The clouds glide across the sky until they join at the horizon to form whirling, flaming sunsets that are slowly doused by nightfall. Then, as if the sun had suddenly crashed, thousands of glistening galaxies are flung out into the deep black night. There is no bigger sky country than the sea. But I cannot enjoy

the incredible beauty around me. It lies beyond my grasp, taunting me. Knowing it can be stolen from me at any time, by a Dorado or shark attack or by a deflating raft, I cannot relax and appreciate it. It is beautifully surrounded by ugly fear. I write in my log that it is a view of heaven from a seat in hell.'

I was thinking of a song that I loved, an oldie from my dad's way-way back in them their days, back in the 1990's back when the dinosaurs roamed the planet and the year or so when my older sister- Kaylie was born so 1993- me I was born in 2002 and Bryan Adams - 'Please Forgive Me,' was the crap, when my sister was young, that was so-o good, I am thinking about here like crazy too. Like- that was one that I would hum to pass the time, from time to time, the pop

charts, of 2015. Funny it was slated wounds- by SIA!

§

The person despises the most is my freaking Boyfriend, as I see the sun come up on a story day lost at sea, lightning cracking next to me, I thought, I was going to be fried… (Boom!!) Also, the hot feeling of the wave hit my face smacking firmly. despising someone I have two in mind right now it would be him, and God- sorry to say I was never on to do that coming from my family life, of doing what was right.

The greatest love of your life would be him, silly! I feel anyways… What I loved in him- and the boys' that I liked- 'Hmm, I like a smart funny guy :) like him, I don't like him to be super serious all the time! from basically a smart clown that's

laid back, (: What is the quality you most like in a man? I like guys that try in school. They have to be cute and make me laugh. Also, I like guys that can carry on a conversation, and that is athletic. If you like a girl, do not talk about other girls with her, either, because that makes them think that you are not interested. I like smart, athletic kids, and they have to have good clothes! I love it when a man wears sweater vests, it's so sexy… I am lost in my last sexy thoughts'…and also a plus is- can read and write- yet- boys today- that may be asking too much. Also, make sure you smell good!

That's such a big turn-on.'

When and where were you happiest? I was the happiest in life, when I was rushing to his arms and he would hold me, or when the school day was at

an end and he was there to take me places, and working on this trip I was the hippest just or that all to die in a heartbeat, like I am having less of those too, and it's getting harder to breathe. Which talent would you most like to have? My talent was swimming and being in the water like I said I have been swimming now for a week, in the middle of the sea. I would say that I have lasted longer than, I should have. Being a good lover, girlfriend, and student… also- and caring for all!

'Every time you look up at the stars, it's like opening entry of my days of the past and thinking. I could be anyone, anywhere right now. Yet, know- I am here in the Pacific… I was wonder well looking up at that star-filled sky if he was too thinking of me- I now know that not to be true.

Things, things that- I wanted to do this summer was- Camping out in the backyard with your best friend, with my sister's eleven years old friends who are mine too- a-lot of them were younger than me but still my girlfriends. driving lessons with my older sister, stopping at the edge of the city, looking up at the same stars. Walking a wooded path, kissing in the moonlight, look up and you're eleven again. Boys in a tiny town, like I did when I was ten and up, to eat candy and think of getting fat as I did then. You're in a sea-boat, and you flipped, that was me… You're staring out the back of a car. Out here where the world begins and ends, it's like nothing ever stops happening.'

'It's not a remarkable note except for one thing- doing this- and being a young girl, there is nothing to remember me by, and my name you may have

forgotten, already like them. Even if the shark swims away, you're not truly safe until you're out of the water, yet that’s not going to happen, now is it? Sharks may leave temporarily and then come back to continue the attack. Get back to shore or back on the boat as quickly as imaginable. If you could change one thing about yourself, it would be everything- I never like anything about me, I am 14 what can I say, that is why I did this to make me- into something, if I could I would have colored my hair maybe light brown… and use different contacts, yet that is not life-changing.

SHARKS- Sometimes, they swim right up and have at it, sometimes they circle for a-while before lunging, and sometimes they sneak up from behind for a surprise attack. To be able to defend against the shark, you must know where

it is, so make every effort to watch the animal, even as you're working out your escape, I try to stay calm and don't make sudden movements. When you first spot the shark, chances are it will swim away without bothering you.

You cannot out-swim a shark, so trying to sprint to safety may not be your best option, unless you're already very close to shore. It's important to keep your wits about you so you can continuously appraise the situation and figure out how to get to safety. I thought this one thought, what I consider your greatest achievement, I have never done it.

Part: 2

I love- love- love- long painted nails, in all colors, long pony tells, and my style like it- honestly, has not changed much from last year. Basic pieces are the

best because you can wear them in many different ways! I would get plenty of plain t-shirts and sweaters, so you can wear them with scarves and jewelry. A basic pair of dark jeans is probably a good idea, as are leggings and maybe yoga pants. For shoes, Sperry's are popular at my school. People are also wearing Converse, Crocs, Nikes, Ugg's, and any kind of girl-ie boot! Tight jeans… and Victoria-Secret undies!

My, iPhone was my life… my most treasured possession? My favorite TV shows were? 'Pretty Little Liars,' 'The Secret Life of the American Teenager…' and anything on MTV, as yours were also in 2015 I am sure. If you were to die and come back as a person it would be like my sister who was perfect at everything. So, I would know how it feels to be the head girl.

All the sharks, I knew a leg was now gone, I was hitting them all in-in the face and gills. Playing dead won't deter an aggressive shark. Your best bet if attacked is to make the shark see you as a strong, credible threat. Usually, a hard blow to the shark's gills, eyes, or snout will cause it to retreat; these are the only vulnerable areas on a shark.

Get into a defensive position, I thought like laying on top of the waves I did that too and go so sunburnt that when back in the water I screamed- for my mother, and that is something a girl my age never will do…

I am pretty sure most shark attacks happen all the time yet not to a girl swimming trying to stay above the chasing waves, I never gave much thought to sharks- not this for inland out

even to the fact my boat would go under in a larger storm, the storm Hurricane

Patricia was a Duration May 28 - June 4 Peak intensity 145 mph (230 km / h) (1-min) 937 mbar (hPa,) I know that my mom and dad were going nuts to look at this storm, on TV knowing that I am out there yet they thought I was strong… that what matters here, they believed I could do this… yet they never go to say go by either to me. My boyfriend was quoted saying- ‘That he didn’t even care…’

There are many opinions out there and you should look around the internet for different sources and articles about attacks and sharks. ‘The genuine understanding of one's inconsequentiality profits a calming sense of being entirely connected to the greater whole. As a tiny part of the world and humanity, I now felt

more at peace, at losing life than at this moment, and yet I never- ever felt so alone.' And I went under and was eaten, never to be seen- or hear from again.

Just a girl like you at age 14- lost at sea- that was me- and how, I would be remembered!

Part: 3

-Then- Next show-

There's an octopus on the screen with giant ears, translucent, flipping through the water in the cold light of a submersible. 'Holy shit, look at that, son!' Richard is like, blowing smoke, I don't know how it got back to him previously.

I have a secret: I wish I was Dumbo the Octopus. I smile to myself. 'Scientists have good-humoredly named this specimen Dumbo,' the TV narrator

says. I'd flop around down there at peace, yes oh so-o modified to freezing deep-ocean temperatures. The big concerns of my life would be what sort of bottom coating slime to feed off of, that's not so dissimilar from now, desirable I wouldn't have any natural predators; then again, I don't have any now, and that hasn't done me a whole lot of good. But it suddenly makes sense: I would like to be under the sea, like an octopus.

'I'll be back,' I say, getting up from my spot on the couch, which Scruggs, a friend who was relegated to the floor, immediately claims, slinking up in one fluid motion.

'You didn't call one-five,' he's like.

'One-five?' I try.

‘Too late.’

I shrug and climb over clothes and people’s legs to the beige, apartment-front-door-style door; I move through that, to the right:

Kristopher’s warm bathroom.

I spend a lot of time on them.

I have a system with bathrooms.

When I pop into Kristopher’s, I continue my normal routine of wasting time. I turn the light off first.

They are sanctuaries, public places of peace spaced throughout the world for people like me.

Then I sigh… and think about all the things I can have like her…

Then I turn around, face the door I just closed, pull down my pants, and fall

on the toilet, I don’t sit; I fall like a carcass, feeling my butt quarter the rim.

Then I put my head in my hands and breathe out as I, well, Ya’ know, piss.

I bury my face in my hands and wish that it could go on forever because it feels good. You do it and it’s done. It doesn’t take any effort or any planning.

I always try to enjoy it, to feel it come out, and understand that it’s my body doing something it has to do, like eating, although I’m not too good at that.

I wonder if anyone does this?

You don’t put it off. That would be screwed up, I think. If you had such problems that you didn’t pee. Like being anorexic, except with urine. If you held it in as self-punishment.

I finish up and flush, reaching behind me, my head still down.

Then I get up and turn on the light.

(Did anyone notice I was in here in the dark? Did they see the lack of light under the crack and notice it like a roach? Did Emmah see?)

Then I look in the mirror- I do that.

I look so normal.

I look like I’ve always looked like I did before the fall of last year.

Dark hair and dark eyes and one snuggled tooth. Big eyebrows that meet in the middle. A long nose, sort of twisted.

Naturally, large pupils, it’s not the pot- which blends into the dark brown to make two big saucer eyes, holes in me.

Wisps of hair above my upper lip.

This is Dariez…

And- and- and I-a always looks like I am about to cry.

In a few seconds, I am going to have to go back and face the crowd.

But I can sit in the dark on the toilet a little more, can’t I?

I put on the hot water and splash it on my face to feel something.

I always manage to make a trip to the bathroom to take five minutes.

I- Dariez, lived right next to the park, see and I have been trespassing in there for years.

At the school for kids like me, that feel they're going to hurt themselves…

'How're you doing kid-o?' Dr. Ross asks.

Her office has a bookshelf that runs floor to ceiling, like all shrinks 'offices, and I think that is what she is yet I don't know- I don't know much of anything if you want to know something- about me.

I- Dariez, used to not want to call them shrinks, but now that I've been through so many, I feel authorized to it. It's an adult term, and it's rude, and I'm more than the two-thirds adult and I'm pretty bad-mannered, so what the hell.

Very thick book… I don't have a whole lot of what's in there- I just have

one big thing, um- but I know all about it from skimming.

There's great stuff in there. Like all shrinks 'offices, anyway, it has

The Bookshelf was full of required reading. First of all, there's the DSM, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, which lists every kind of psychological disorder known to man- that's fun reading.

There's a disease called Ondine's Curse, in which your body loses the ability to breathe involuntarily. Can you imagine? You have to think 'breathe, breathe' all the time, or you stop breathing.

Most people who get it die.

I don't think you can find a DSM II. It came out in 1963 or something. It

takes like ten years to put one out, and they're working on VI. Jeez, I could be a shrink. If the shrink is classy, she'll (mostly she'll, occasion-ally he'll) have a bunch of DSMs, because they come in different editions- III, IV, and V are the most common. Now, in addition to the DSMs, there is an assortment of specific books on psychiatric disorders, things like The Freedom from Depression Workbook; Anxiety and Panic Attacks: Their Cause and Cure, and the 7 Habits of Highly Effective People.

Always hardcover. No paperbacks in a shrink's office.

Usually, there's at least one book on childhood sexual abuse, like The Wounded Heart, and one shrink I went to catch me looking at that and said, 'That book is about child sexual abuse.'

And- I was like, ‘Uh-hum?’

And she said, ‘It’s for folks who were abused.’ And I nodded like it was over my head.

‘Were you? You lost in space-’

She had a little-old-lady face, this one, with a shock of white hair, and I never-ever saw-ed her once more. What kind of question was that? Unquestionably, I wasn’t ill-treated. If I were, things would be so simple. I’d have a motive for being in shrinks ‘offices, now is it?

I’d have an explanation and something, that I could work on.

The world wasn’t going to give me something that tidy.

‘I’m fine. Well, I’m not fine- I’m here.’

‘Is there something wrong with that?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘You’ve been coming here for a while.’

Today she has a red sweater and red lipstick that is the same red. It’s as if she went to the paint store to match them up. Dr. Ross always has such amazing outfits. It’s not that she’s particularly sexy or beautiful; she just carves herself out well.

‘I want to not have to come here.’

‘Well, you’re in a process. How’re you doing?’ This is her prompt question. The shrinks always have one prompt question. I’ve had ones that said ‘What’s up?’ ‘How are we?’ And even- ‘What’s

happening in the world of Dariez?' They never change. It's like their jingle.

'I didn't wake up well today.'

'Did you sleep well?'

'I slept okay.'

Maybe they're the ones who win all the money on TV. Then they have the gall to charge my mom $150 / hour. Maybe they do… They're very greedy. She looks completely stone, staring ahead. I don't know how they do this: the psych-poker face.

Psychologists should play poker.

'What happened when you woke up?'

'I was having a dream- I dream all the time, just like the park I loved as a kid, I share that too with it.

I don’t know what it was, but when I woke up, I had this awful realization that I was awake. It hit me like a brick in the groin.’

‘Like a brick in the groin, I see.’

‘I didn’t want to wake up. I was having a much better time asleep. And that’s sad. It was almost like a reverse nightmare like when you wake up from a nightmare, you’re so relieved. I woke up in a nightmare.’

‘And what is that nightmare, Dariez?’

‘Life.’

‘Life is a nightmare.’

‘Yes.’

We stop. The cosmic moment, I guess. O-oh, is living a nightmare? We

need to spend ten seconds contemplating that.

‘I lay in bed.’

I think, and don’t think, and then do some more…

‘What did you do when you realized you were awake?’

I had not eaten the night previously. There were more things to tell her, things I held back: like the fact that I was hungry in bed this morning.

I went to bed exhausted from homework and knew as I hit the pillow, that I would pay for it in the morning, that I would cross the line where my stomach gets so needy that I can’t eat anything; that I would wake up hungry, I woke up and my stomach was screaming, hollowing itself out under my little chest.

I didn’t want to eat. The idea of eating made me hurt more. I could not think of no matter what, not one single solitary food item, that I would be able to handle, except coffee yogurt, and I was sick of coffee yogurt. I didn’t want to do anything about it.

Only the pure urge, the one thing that never let me down, got me out of bed fifty minutes later. The fists pushed my stomach against itself and fooled it into thinking it was full. I rolled over on my stomach and balled my fists and held them against my gut like I was praying. I held this position, warm, my brain rotating, the seconds whirring by.

‘I got up when I had to pee.’

‘I see.’

‘That was great.’

‘You like peeing. You’ve mentioned this before.’

‘Yeah. It’s simple.’

‘You like simple- boy to me.’

‘Doesn’t all and sundry?’

‘Some people thrive on complexity, Dariez.’

‘Well, not me. As I was walking over here, I was thinking … I have this fantasy of being a bike messenger.’

‘Ah.’

Part: 4

‘It would be so simple, and direct, and I would get paid for it.

It would be an Anchor.’

‘What about the school, Dariez? You have school for an Anchor.’

‘School is too all over the place. It spirals out into a million different things.’

‘Your Tentacles.’

I have to hand it to her; Dr. Ross picked up on my lingo pretty quickly. Tentacles are my term- the Tentacles are the evil tasks that invade my life. Like, for example, my American History class last week, which necessitated me writing a paper on the weapons of the Revolutionary War, which necessitated me traveling to the Metropolitan Museum to check out some of the old guns, which necessitated me getting in the subway, which necessitated me being away from my cell phone and e-mail for 45 minutes, which meant I wasn’t anywhere close to a 98.7 average (body temperature which meant that I didn’t get to respond to a mass mail sent out by my teacher asking

who needed extra credit, which meant other kids snapped up the extra credit, which meant I wasn't going to get a 97 in the class, that's what you needed to get,) which also meant I wasn't going to get into a Good College, if I keep going on like this, which meant I wasn't going to have a Good Job, which meant I wasn't going to have health insurance, which meant I'd have to pay tremendous amounts of money for the shrinks and drugs my brain needed, which meant that if I keep going, I wasn't going to have enough money to pay for a Good Lifestyle, which meant I'd feel ashamed, which meant I'd get depressed, and that was the big one because I knew what that did to me: it made it so-o I wouldn't get out of bed, which led to the ultimate thing, homeless-ness. If you can't get out of bed for long enough, people come and take

your bed away. Unless I got cancer in the balls and had to have my nuts cut off all was going to be good- no? Yah- no!

There aren't any Tentacles. There's just a stack of tasks that you tackle. You don't have to deal with other people. The opposite of the Tentacles is the Anchors. The Anchors are things that occupy my mind and make me feel good temporarily. Riding my bike is an Anchor. Doing flashcards is an Anchor. Watching people play video games at Kristopher's is an Anchor. The answers are simple and sequential. There aren't any decisions.

'There are a lot of Tentacles,' I admit. 'But I should be able to handle them. The problem is that I'm so lazy.'

'How are you lazy, Dariez?'

‘I waste at least an hour every day lying in bed. Then I waste time pacing. I waste time thinking. I waste time being quiet and not saying: like- like- like- like- anything because- *cuz*- I’m afraid I’ll speech disorder.’

‘Do you have a problem with hesitating, and stammering?’

‘When I’m depressed, it won’t come outright. I’ll trail off in midsentence.’ ‘I see.’ She writes something down on her legal pad.

Dariez, this will go on your permanent record.

The party line is that some of the most profound truths about us are things that we stop saying in the middle, but I think they do it to make us feel important. One thing’s for sure: no one else in life

says to me, ‘Wait, Dariez, what were you going to say?’

‘I don’t-’ I shake my head. ‘The jumping of the old coaster thing.’ ‘What? What were you going to say?’ This is another trick of shrinks. They never let you stop in mid-thought. If you open your mouth, they want to know exactly what you had the purpose of saying.

‘I was going to say that I don’t think, yet I don’t to that, yet do that all the time, like- like- like the stuttering is like, a real problem. I just think it’s one of my symptoms.’

So are the trimmers…

‘Like sweating.’

‘All Right.’

The sweating is awful. It’s not as bad as not eating, but it’s weird, cold-

cold freaking sweat, smelling like skin concentrate all over my forehead, having to be wiped off every two minutes.

Folks notice. It's one of the few things people notice.

'You're not stuttering now.'

'This is being paid for. I don't want to waste time.'

Pause. Now we have one of our silent battles; I look at Dr. Ross and she looks at me. It's a contest as to who will crack first. She puts on her poker face; I don't have any extra faces to put on, just the normal Dariez face.

I want to feel my brain slide back into the slot it was meant to be in, rest there the way it did before the fall of last year, back when I was young and witty, and my teachers said I had incredible

promise, and I had incredible promise, and I spoke up in class because I was excited and smart about the world. We locked eyes…

I'm waiting for her to say something profound, I always am, even though it'll never happen. I'm waiting for her to say 'Dariez, what you need to do is X' and for the Shift to occur. I want there to be a Shift so bad. I want the Shift so bad. I'm waiting for the phrase that will invoke it. It'll be like a miracle in my life. But is Dr. Ross a miracle worker? No. She's a thin, tan lady from Greece with red lipstick.

She breaks first.

'About your bike riding, you said you wanted to be a messenger.'

'Yes.'

‘You already have a bike, correct?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you ride it a lot?’

‘Not that much. Mom won’t let me ride it to school. But I ride around Knox on weekends.’

‘What does it feel like when you ride your bike, Dariez?’

I pause. ‘...Geometric.’

‘Geometric.’

‘Yeah. Like, you have to avoid this truck. Don’t get hit in the head by these metal pipes. Make a right. The rules are defined, and you follow them.’

‘Like a video game.’

‘Sure. I love video games. Even just to watch. Since I was a kid.’

‘Which you often refer to as ‘back when you were happy.’’

‘Right…?’ I smooth my shirt out. I get dressed up for these little meetings too. Good khakis and a white dress shirt. We’re dressing up for each other. We should go get some coffee and make a scandal- the Greek therapist and her high school boyfriend. We could be famous. That would get me money. That might make me happy.

‘Do you remember some of the things that made you happy?’

‘Video games.’ I laugh.

‘What’s funny?’

‘I was walking down my block the other day, and behind me was a mother

with her kid, and the mother was saying, ‘Now, Joy, I don’t want you to complain about it. You can’t play video games twenty-four hours a day.’ And Joy goes, ‘But I want to!’ And, I turned around and told him, ‘Me too.’’

-And-

‘You want to play video games for twenty-four hours a day?’

‘Or watch. I just want to not be me. Whether it’s sleeping or playing video games or riding my bike or studying. Giving my brain up. That’s what’s important.’

‘You’re very clear about what you want.’

‘Yeah.’

‘What did you want when you were a kid? Back when you were happy?

What did you want to be when you grew up?’ Dr. Ross is a good shrink, I think. That isn’t the answer. But it is a damn good question. What did I want to be when I grew up?

‘My mind is like a backed-up toilet spewing shit all over the place!!!’

I remember arriving that night at the amusement park. The park was forgotten for the rest of its time. The Ferris wheel creaked in the slight breeze. The Merry-go-rounds had gathered dust from being not used for many years. I had to be careful not to fall over the discarded stuff lying around everywhere. The light was vanishing, so he used his torch-light to see the obstacles. A rat was running from the beam of light that disturbed its search for something to eat, cow looking

at me with the glimmer in their eyes to pick my eyes out.

Finally, I arrived at the theme park. It looked abandoned, and I was at the top of the ride, the roller coaster, where I was going to jump off. I could see all over very far, what was left from the Ferris wheel creaked in its rusty bearings when the wind blew over the area. The horses on the Merry-go-round had a thick layer of dust on their saddles. No kid would ever ride on them again. It got dark early this time of the year, so I got a torchlight from the car. I did not want to step on some of the trash that covered the ground.

'Maybe not, maybe so.' What a shrink answer, maybe you don't see everything you think you do. 'I can't take maybe's light- a little boy.

I have to make money, and make sure your Ok-ay also.' 'I don't think there's much of a market for that.' I smile. 'I wanted to make maps,' I tell Dr. Ross. 'Cities.' 'Maps of what?' 'On the computer?' 'No, by hand.' 'I see, I see.'

'We're going to talk more about money next time. We have to stop now.'

I look at the clock. 7:05. She always gives an extra three minutes.

'What are you going to do when you leave, Dariez?'

She always asks that. What am I always going to do?

I'm going to go home and freak out. I'm going to sit with my family and try not to talk about myself and what's wrong. I'm going to try and eat. Then I'm going to try and sleep. I dread it. I can't

eat, and I can’t sleep. I’m not doing well in terms of being a functional human, you know?

Hey, soldier, what’s the matter?

I can’t sleep, and I can’t eat, sir!

How about I pump you full of a lead, soldier, would that get you motivated?

Can’t say, sir! I’d probably still be unable to sleep or eat, just a little bit heavier from the lead.

Get up there and fight, soldier! The enemy is there! The enemy is too strong. I can’t fight them. They’re too smart.

You’re smart too, soldier. Not smart enough.

So-o, you’re just going to give up?

That’s the plan.

‘I’m going to just keep at it,’ I tell Dr. Ross. ‘That’s all I can do. I’ll keep at it and hope it gets better.’

‘Are you taking your medicine?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you seeing Dr. Barnthy?’

Dr. Jarnerny is the psychopharmacology. He’s the one who prescribes me meds and sends me to pee-pee like Dr. Ross. He’s a trip in his way, a little fat Santa with rings embedded in his fingers.

‘Yes, later in the week.’

‘You know to do what he says.’

Yes, Doctor. I’ll do what you say. I’ll do what you all say.

‘Here,’ I hand Dr. Ross the check from my mom.

When I was four, this is how things were:

One was cold, one was hot, and the red one was really hot. Two millimeters wasn’t enough. I burned myself on it and Dad, who hadn’t realized (‘It must only get hot in the afternoon,’) encased it in dark gray foam with duct tape, I remember there was a green pipe and a red pipe and a white pipe, gathered near the corner of the hallway just before the bathroom, and as soon as I could walk I investigated them all, walked up to them and put my palm about two millimeters away from each one to test if it was hot or cold.

Our family lived in a crappy apartment in Knox.

But-but-but, duct tape never stopped me and I thought the foam was fun to pick at and chew so, I picked it off and chewed it and then when other kids came over to my house, I dared them to touch the re-exposed pipe; I told them, anyone who came in had to touch it, otherwise they were a pussy, which was a word I learned from Daddy watching TV, which I thought was great because it was a word with two meanings: the cat that girls liked and the thing you called people to make them do stuff. Just like the chicken had two meanings: the bird that walked around and the white stuff you ate.

I didn't know it was crappy at the time, for the reason that I didn't have our better apartment to compare it to yet. But there was exposed piping. That's no good.

You don’t want to raise your child in a house with exposed piping.

Some people touched the hot pipe if you called them pussy as well.

Part: 5

I had my room… but I didn’t like to be alone in it; the only room…

I liked to be in was the living room, under the table that held all the brochures.

I made it my little fort; I put a blanket…

Yes, a blanket over me and worked in there…

Yeh- yeah- yepper- with a light that Dad rigged up…

I worked on maps…

I worked on drawings…

Drawing is something that I love…

I loved maps… too…

I knew that we lived in Knox and I had a map of it, a Knox Five or so Boroughs parts - with all the streets laid out.

I knew exactly where we lived, on the cover of 11 Street and 5rd Avenue.

Third Avenue was a yellow street because, it was an avenue, big and long and significant.

Fifty-Third Street was a little white street that went across Knox.

The streets went sideways and- and the avenues went up and down; that was all you had to recall. (Dad helped me

remember, too, when we went out for pancakes.)

He would ask, ‘Do you want them cut in streets and avenues, Dariez?’

And- and- And I’d go- ‘Sure!’

And- and… he’d cut the stack of pancakes in a grid, and we’d name each street and avenue as we went along, making sure to get on the Ave. and- and- 5th Street.)

It was so simple… so simple…

If you were forward-thinking (like- um- ah- I- I was, duh) … you knew that traffic on the even streets went east (East for Even) and the odd streets went west (West is Odd.)

Then, every bunch of streets, there were fat yellow streets, like the avenues, that went both ways. These were

the famous streets: 41th St., 32nd St. The complete list from the bottom up was 11 St., Jender St., Smaith St., 13th St., 25th St., 34th St., 42nd St., 57th St., 72nd St.

(there wasn't any big street in the 60s; they got shafted,) 79th St., 86th St., 99th St., and then you were in Harlem, where Knox effectively ended for little white boys who made forts under encyclopedias and studied maps.

As soon as I saw the Knox map…

I wanted to draw it…

I should be able to draw the place where… um, where…

I - I- I'd myself for one and one only like existed, lived, and serviced.

So-o…

I asked Mom for tracing paper and she got it for me, and I brought it into my fort and I pointed the light right down on the first map of the town - downtown… where, where, ah- where 17th Street was, and the run-of-the-mill market worked.

The streets were crazy down there; they didn't have any kind of streets and avenues; they just had names and they looked like a game of Pick-Up Sticks.

But- but- but- ah- o-o-o- before, before, be-for-e- I- I could even worry about the streets, I had to get the land right. Knox was actually- truly- built on the property.

Sometimes, like sometimes-ssss- when they were digging up the streets you saw it down there- real dirt!

And the land had a certain curve to it at the bottom of the island, like a dinosaur head, bumpy on the right and straight on the left, a swooping majestic bottom.

I held my tracing paper down and tried to trace the line of lower Knox.

I couldn’t do it.

I mean, it was ridiculous… outlandish…

My line didn’t have whatsoever to do with the real one.

I didn’t understand I- l- I was holding the tracing paper steady.

I looked at my small hands, and wonder- I think about everything and nothing at all. ‘Stay still,’ I told it…

I crumpled up the paper and tried o'er.

The line wasn’t right again. It didn’t have the swoop…

I crumpled up the paper and tried again, why- why-why- oh never mind- I thought.

This line was even worse than before.

Knox looked square… slanted…

I tried again… frustrated…

Oh boy, now it looked like a dick.

Crumple… shit- shit- fracking sucking a dick shit…

(girl looks up at me, rolling her eyes)

□ (I thought he was cute then–)

Now it looked like a turd, another word I picked up from

Dad... who came to the school to see me…

Crumple… I suck… not dick like the drawing but something…

Now it looked like a piece of fruit… yet, dick-ish nonetheless…

It looked like everything- all things… but what it was supposed to look like: Knox.

I couldn’t do it… piss-balls…

I didn’t realize- realized- then that when you trace stuff, you’re supposed to have a tracing table, lighted from below, not a trembling four-year-old hand, and locks to hold the paper straight…

So-o so, I just thought I was a letdown to all-and me too.

They always said on TV you could do anything you wanted, but here I was trying to do something, and it wasn't working. I would never be able to do it. I crumpled up the last piece of tracing paper and started sobbing, my head in my hands in my fort. Mom heard me.

Joy why are you here-

I cut…

'Dariez?'

'What? Go away.'

'What's wrong, honey?'

'Don't open the curtain! Don't open it! I have things here.'

'Why are you crying? What's the matter?'

‘I can’t do it.’

‘What’s the matter?’

‘Nothing!’

‘Tell Mommy, come on. I’m going to open the blanket’

‘No!’

With her occupied, I ran across the room, streaking tears, wanting to get to the bathroom, to sit down on the toilet with the light off and splash hot water on my face.

But Mom was too quick. She shoved the encyclopedias back and loped across the room, swooping me up in her thin arms with the elbow skin that you could pull down. I beat my palms against her.

I jumped at her face as she pulled the blanket aside, bringing it taut under the encyclopedias. Mom threw her hands up and held the books in place, saving both of us from getting clobbered.

(A week later, she'd have Dad move the encyclopedias.)

'Dariez! We do not hit Mommy!'

'I can't do it I can't do it I can't do it!' I hit her.

'What?' She hugged me tightly, so I had no room to hit.

'What can't you do?'

'I can't draw Knox!'

'Huh?' Mom drew her face up and away from me, looked me in the eyes. 'Is that what you were trying to do down there?'

I nodded, sniffled.

‘You were trying to trace Knox with the tracing paper I bought you?’

‘I can’t do it.’

‘Dariez, no one can.’ She laughed. ‘You can’t just trace freehand. It’s impossible!’

‘Then how do they make the maps?’

Mom paused.

‘See? See? Someone can do it!’

‘They have the equipment, Dariez. They’re grown-ups and they have special tools that they use.’

‘Well, I need those tools.’

‘Dariez.’

‘Let’s buy them.’

‘Honey.’

‘Do they cost a lot of money?’

‘Honey.’

Mom put me down on the sofa, which turned into a bed for her and Dad at night, and sat next to me. I wasn’t crying anymore. I wasn’t hitting anymore. My brain was all right back then; it didn’t get stuck in ruts. ‘Dariez,’ she sighed, looked at me. ‘I have an idea.

Instead of spending your time trying to trace maps of Knox, why don’t you make your maps of imaginary places?’

And that was the closest I’ve ever come to an epiphany.

I could make up my city. I could use my streets. I could put a river where I wanted. I could put the ocean where I

wanted. I could put the bridges where I wanted, and I could put a big highway right across the middle of town…

Like -LIKE- like… Knox should have but, but, didn't. I could make my subway system. I could make my street names. I could have my grid stretching off to the edges of the map. I smiled and hugged Mom.

She got me some thick paper-white construction paper. Later on, I grew to prefer straight computer paper. I went back under my fort and turned the light on and started on my first map. And I did that for the next five years-whenever I was in class, I didn't doodle, I drew maps. Hundreds of them. When I finished, I crumpled them; it was making them that was important. I did cities on the ocean, cities with two rivers meeting in the

middle, cities with one big river that bent, cities with bridges, crazy interchanges, circles, and boulevards. I made the cities. That made me happy. That was my Anchor. And until I turned nine and turned to video games, that was what I wanted to be when I grew up: a mapmaker.

Part: 6

My family shouldn't have to put up with me.

They're good people, solid, happy.

Sometimes when I'm with them I-I-I thinks I'm on television.

We live in an apartment-a much better one than the Knox one, but still not good enough, not something to be proud of-in Knox.

Knox is a big fat blob with its ugly shape across from Knox; it looks like Jabba the Hutt counting his money.

Its bridges connect to Knox and it’s split up by Jenders and creeks-filthy green streaks of water that remind you that it used to be a swamp. There are brownstones-limestone and maroon houses that stand

Like- like fence posts and always have Indian men refurbishing them-and everybody goes crazy for those, pays millions of dollars to live in them. But other than that, it’s a pretty status less place. It’s a shame we moved out of Knox, where all the real people with power live.

The walk from Dr. Ross’s office to our apartment is a short one but loaded with mocking stores. Food stores. The absolute worst part of being depressed is

food. A person's relationship with food is one of their most important relationships. I don't think your relationship with your parents is that important. Some people never know their parents. I don't think your relationships with your friends are important. But your relationship with air- that's key. You can't break up with air. You're kind of stuck together. Only slightly less crucial is water. And then food. You can't be dropping food to hang with someone else. You need to strike up an agreement with it.

I never liked eating traditional American things: pork chops, steak, rack of lamb … I still don't. Never mind vegetables. I used to like the foods that come in abstract shapes: chicken nuggets, Fruit Roll-Ups, hot dogs. I liked junk food. I could demolish a bag of Cheez Doodles; I'd have Doodle- Cheez so far infused into

my fingertips, I'd be tasting it on myself for a day. And so, I had a good thing going with food. I thought about it the way everyone else did; when you're hungry, you have some.

Then last fall happened, and I stopped eating.

Now I get mocked by these groceries, pizza places, ice cream stores, delis, Chinese places, bakeries, sushi joints, McDonald's.

They sit out in the street, pushing what I can't enjoy. My stomach shrank or something; it doesn't take in much, and if I force in a certain amount it rejects everything, sends me to the bathroom to vomit in the dark.

If he would just relax, let the rope go, I'd be able to give him all the food he

wanted. But he’s down there making me dizzy and tired, giving extra tugs as I pass restaurants that smell like fat and grease.

It’s like a gnawing, the tug of a rope wrapped around the end of my gullet.

There’s a man down there and he wants food, but the only way he knows to ask for it is to tug on the rope, and when he does, it closes up the entrance so-0 I can’t put anything in.

My stomach wants no part of it. Everything is forced. The food wants to stay on the plate, and once it’s inside me, it wants to get back on the plate. When I do eat, it’s one of two experiences: a battle or a Slaughter. When I’m bad-when the Cycling is going on in my brain-it’s a Battle.

Every bite hurts.

People give me strange looks: What's wrong, Dariez, why aren't you eating? But then there are moments when it comes together. The Shift hasn't happened yet- yet- yet- maybe it never will, but sometimes-just enough times to give me hope my brain jars back into where it's supposed to be.

When I feel- one of these: (I call them the Fake Shifts) I should always eat, although I don't; I sometimes stubbornly, foolishly- dumbly- I-I-I try to hold the feeling, and- and get things done while my mind can operate, and neglect to eat, and then…

I'm back where… I started.

But oh, when I slip back into being okay when I'm around food, watch out.

It's all going in. Eggs and hamburgers and fries and ice cream and marmalade and Fruity Pebbles and cookies and broccoli…

And- and- and- even-and noodles and sauce… Screw you; I'm going to eat all of you.

…I play with my food and she is looking at me with a look that, I give the dog when she is taking a shit, in the yard.

I'm Joy, she was over the way…

Torah- a woman- I don't know when my body chemistry is going to line up to let me eat again, so you are all getting in me right now.

All my cells take the food in and they love it and they love my brain for it and I smile, and I am full; I am full and functional and I can do anything, and once…

I eat-this is the amazing part-once I eat, I sleep, I sleep as I should…

I-I-I-

And that feels so-o mmm- good…

I eat it all, and the man is away from his rope.

He’s busy down there eating everything- all things- that falls inside, running around like a chicken with its head cut off, the head on the floor, munching on all the food of its own… like- like a hunter who just brought home a kill… or were I form on the side of the road… yet- never-mind…

…And- but then- and- but- and, I wake up and the man is back, my stomach is tight…

…And I don’t know what it was that got me to have a

Slaughter eating experience…

It’s not pot… It’s not girls… yet I never really had one of those, just the thoughts of…

It’s not my family… yet, yet, yet- their love is strangling me…

I’ve- I- I- ongoingly like to-to think it must just be interaction- or A-sexual, in which case we’re looking for the Shift and we haven’t found it yet-yet.

Part: 7

(Back)

‘Dariez?’

‘Hi, Mom.’

The night is here except for a thin gray at the edge of the sky, and the trees are thick with rain, and the drizzle is pissing on me as I come up to my house…

No sunsets in spring. I lean in and ring the buzzer, streaked bronze from years of use-the most used buzzer in the building.

It growls deeply, amplified by the lobby…

(Lobby… Mailroom- mailbox, more like, just a compartment for mailboxes.)

I throw open one door and then the other. It’s warm in the house, and it smells like cooked starch. The dogs greet me. (now)

‘Hi, Sarrah…

Hi, Jordan…’

(Back)

They’re little dogs…

My sister named them…; she’s nine.

Sarrah is a mutt… not her the dog…

My- my- father says he’s a cross between a Chihuahua and a German shepherd… which must’ve been some wild dog sex... they had, until last year I thought that was the only way girls and boys did that too…

I hope the German shepherd was the man...

Or else the German shepherd girl probably wasn’t too satisfied…

Sarrah has a pronounced under-bite; he looks like two dogs where one is eating the other's head from below, but when I take him for a walk, girls love him and talk to me.

Then they realize- thought of- figure out- what I'm young and or messed up, and they move on.

Jarddan, a Tibetan spaniel, looks like a small, brown lion.

He's small and cute but completely crazy.

His breed was devised in Tibet to guard monasteries. When he came into our home, he at once fixated on the house as a monastery, the bathroom as the most sacred monastic cell, and my mom as the Abbess. You can't go near my mother without Jarddan protecting her.

When she’s in the bathroom in the morning, Jarddan has to be in there with her, placed upon the counter by the sink as she brushes her teeth.

Jarddan barks at me. Since I started losing it, he started barking at me. It’s not something any of us mention.

‘Dariez, how was Dr. Ross…?’

Mom comes out of the kitchen. She’s still tall and skinny, looking better each year. I know that’s weird to think, but what the hell- she’s just a woman who happens to be my mom.

It’s amazing how she looks statelier and more confident as she gets older.

I’ve seen pictures of her in college and she didn’t look like much. Dad

is looking like he made a better decision every year.

‘It… was okay.’ I hug her. She’s taken such good care of me since I got bad; I owe her everything and I love her, and I tell her these days, although every time I say it, it gets a little diluted. I think you run out of I love you.

‘Are you still happy with her?’

‘Yeah.’

You can’t afford to get anyone else, I think, looking at the crack in the wall next to my mom. This crack in our front hallway has been there for three or four years.

Dad paints over it and it just reracks. We’ve tried putting a mirror on it but it’s a strange place to put a mirror- on one side of a hallway- and my sister

started calling it the Vampire Mirror to tell if people who came into the house were vampires, and it came down after a few weeks when I came home stoned and stumbled into it.

‘Because, if you’re not we’ll get you someone else.’

Now there’s an exposed crack again. It’s never going to get fixed.

‘You don’t need to get anyone else.’

‘How’s your eating? Are you hungry?’

Yes, I think. I am going to eat the food my mom made me. I’m still in control of my mind and I have medication and I am going to make this happen.

‘Yes.’

‘Good! To the kitchen!’

I go in, and the place is all set for me. Dad and my sister, Sarah, are sitting at the circular table, knives, and forks in hand, posing for me.

‘How do we look?’ Dad asks, banging his silverware on the table. ‘Do we look hungry?’

My parents are always looking into new ways to fix me. They’ve tried acupuncture, yoga, cognitive therapy, relaxation tapes, various kinds of forced exercise (until I found my bike,) self-help books, Tae Bo, and feng shui in my room. They’ve spent a lot of money on me. I’m ashamed.

‘Eat! Eat! Eat!’ Sarah says. ‘We were waiting for you.’ ‘Is this necessary?’ I ask.

‘We’re just making things homier for you.’ Mom brings a baking pan over to the table. It smells hot and juicy. Inside the pan are big orange things cut in half.

‘We have squash’-she turns back to the stove-rice, and chicken.’ She brings over a pot of white rice with vegetable bits sprinkled over it and a plate of chicken patties. I go for them a star-shaped one, a dinosaur-shaped one. Sarah grabs at the dinosaur-shaped one at the same time.

‘The dinosaurs are mine!’

‘Okay.’ I let her. She kicks me under the table. ‘How’re you feeling?’ she whispers. ‘Not good.’

She nods.

Sarah knows what this means.

It means she'll see me on the couch tonight, tossing and turning and sweating as Mom brings me warm milk. It means she'll see me watching TV, but not really watching, just staring and not laughing, as I don't do my homework.

It means she'll see me sinking and failing. She reacts well to this. She does more schoolwork and has more fun. She doesn't want to end up like me. At least I'm giving someone an example not to follow.

'I'm sorry. They're trying to do a big thing for you.'

'I can tell.'

'So, Dariez, how was school today?' Dad asks. He forks into the squash and looks at me through his glasses. He's short and wears glasses, but

as he says, at least he has hair-thick, dark stuff that he passed on to me. He tells me I'm blessed; the genes are good on both sides, and if I think I'm depressed now, imagine if I knew I was going to lose my hair like everyone else! Ha.

'All right,' I say.

'What'd you do?'

'Sat in class and followed instructions.'

We clink at our food. I take my first bite- a carefully constructed forkful of chicken, rice, and squash-and mash it into my mouth. I will eat this; I chew it and feel that it tastes good and rear my tongue back and send it down. I hold it. All right. It is in there.

'What did you do in... let's see... American History?'

‘That one wasn’t so good. The teacher called on me and I couldn’t talk.’

‘Oh, Dariez…’ Mom is like.

I start constructing another bite.

‘What do you mean you couldn’t talk?’ Dad asks.

‘I knew the answer, but… I just…’ ‘You trailed off,’ Mom says.

I nod as I take in the next bite. ‘Dariez, you can’t keep doing that.’

‘Honey-’ Mom tells him.

‘When you know the answer to something, you have to speak up for yourself; how can that not be clear?’

‘We know… Your mother and I know and we’re doing everything we can to help you. Right?’ He looks across the table at Mom.

‘Yes.’ ‘Me too,’ Sarah says. ‘I’m doing everything I can, too.’

‘That’s right.’ Mom reaches across to ruffle her hair. ‘You’re doing great.’

‘Yesterday, I could’ve smoked pot, but didn’t,’ I say, looking up, curled over my plate.

‘Dariez!’ Dad snaps.

‘Let’s not talk about this,’ Mom says.

‘KID’S- We had buttons put down over there is no one taking care of her, and she was old…’

Dad takes in a heaping forkful of squash and chews it like a furnace- and said ‘um- hmm.’

‘Don’t jump on him,’ Mom says, they were not happy about it at all.

‘I’m not, I’m being friendly.’ Dad smiles.

‘Dariez, you are blessed with a good mind. You just have to have confidence in it and talk when people call on you. Like you used to do. Back when they had to tell you to stop talking.’

‘It’s different now…’ the third bite.

‘But you should know; it’s important. I’m doing experiments with my mind, to see how it got the way it is.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Not around your sister,’ Mom says. ‘I want to tell you some news about Jarddan.’ Hearing his name, the dog walks into the kitchen, takes up his

position by Mom. ‘I took him to the vet today.’

‘So, you didn’t go to work?’

‘Right.’

‘And that’s why you cooked.’

‘Exactly.’

‘So, you want to know what happened at the vet?’ ‘It’s crazy,’ Sarah says.

‘We took him in for the seizures he’s been having,’ Mom says.

‘And you’ll never believe what the vet said.’

‘What?’

‘They took some blood tests last time, and the results came back I was sitting in the little room with Jarddan; he

was being very good. The vet comes in and looks at the papers and says,

‘These numbers are not compatible with life.’’

I’m jealous of her. Can you be jealous of your mom for being able to handle things? I couldn’t take a day off, take a dog to the vet, and cook dinner. That’s like three times too much stuff for me to get done in one day. How am I ever going to have my own house?

I laugh. There’s a bite on my fork in front of me. It shakes.

‘What do you mean?’

‘That’s what I asked him. And it turns out that a dog’s blood sugar level is supposed to be between forty and one hundred. You know what Jarddan’s is?’

‘What?’

‘Nine.’

‘Ruff!’ Jarddan barks.

‘Then’-Mom is laughing now there's some sort of another number, some enzyme ratio level, that’s supposed to be between ten and thirty, and Jarddan’s is one-eighty!’

‘Good dog,’ Dad says.

‘The vet didn’t know what to make of it. He told me to keep giving him the supplements and the vitamins, but that he’s a medical miracle.’

I look over at Jarddan, the Tibetan spaniel. Pushed-in shaggy face, black nose, big dark eyes like mine.

Panting and drooling. Resting on his furry front legs.

‘He shouldn’t be alive, but he is,’ Mom says.

I look at Jarddan more.

Why are you bothering?

You’ve got an excuse. You’ve got bad blood.

You must like living; I guess I would if I were you. Going from meal to meal and guarding Mom. It’s a life. It doesn’t involve tests or homework. You don’t have to buy things.

‘Dariez?’

You shouldn’t be able to be alive and you are. Do you want to trade?

‘I… I guess it’s cool.’

‘It’s very cool,’ Mom says. ‘It’s by God’s grace that this dog lives.’

Oh, right, God. Forgot about him. He's, according to Mom, going to have a role in me getting better.

But I find God to be an ineffectual shrink. He adopts the 'do nothing' method of therapy. You tell him your problems and he, ah, does nothing.

'I'm done,' Sarah says. She picks up her plate and trots out of the room, calling to Jarddan. He follows.

'I can't eat any more either,' I say.

I've managed five bites. My stomach is churning and closing fast. It's all such inoffensive food; I shouldn't have any problems with it.

I should be able to eat three plates of it. I'm a growing boy; I shouldn't

have trouble sleeping; I should be playing sports! I should be making out with girls.

I should be finding what I love about this world. I should be frickin' eating and sleeping and drinking and study and watch TV and be normal.

'Try a little more, Dariez,' Mom says. 'No pressure, but you should eat.'

That's…

Right…

I'm going to eat. I slice off the top of the squash, in streets and avenues, a big chunk, and put it on my fork and get it in my mouth. I'm going to eat you.

I chew it, soft and yielding, easily molded into a shape that fits down my throat. It tastes sweet. Now hold it. It's in my stomach. I'm sweating.

The sweating gets worse around my parents. My stomach has it. My stomach is full of six bites of this meal. I can take six bites. I won't lose it. I won't lose this meal that my mom has made. If a dog can live, I can eat. I hold it. I make a fist. I tense my muscles.

'Are you okay?'

'One second,' I say.

I lose…

My stomach hitches as I leave the table.

What were you trying to do, soldier?

I was trying to eat, sir!

And what happened?

I got caught thinking about some crap, sir!

What kind of crap?

How I want to live less than my parents' dog.

Are you still concentrated on the enemy, soldier?

I don’t think so.

Do you even know who the enemy is?

I think… it’s me.

That’s right.

I have to concentrate on myself.

Yes. But not right now, because now you’re going to the bathroom to throw up! It’s tough to fight when you’re throwing up!

I stumble into the bathroom, turn off the light, close the door. The horrible

thing is that I like this part because when it's over I know I'll be warm; I'll have the warmth in me of a body that has just been through a trauma. I bear down on the toilet in the dark- I-I know just where to go -and my stomach hitches again and slams up at me, and I open up and groan. It comes out, and I hear my mother outside, sniffling, and my dad muttering, probably holding her.

I grip the handle and flush a few times, alternating filling the toilet and flushing it. When I'm done, I'll go to sleep, and I won't do any homework; I'm not up to it tonight.

And I think as I'm down there:

The Shift is coming. The Shift has to become.

Because like- if you keep on living like this you'll die.

Part: 8

That's Joy… She's one of the teens. Did they tell you about the renovations?

Yeah.

How old are you?

14 um - no 15.

She looks stressed out for 15. You need to relax. Get a girlfriend or something, you know.

- I'm working on it.

- M-mm-hmm.

So, what is it you- do here, exactly?

Same thing as you.

Are you a patient?

What were you doing in the emergency room this morning?

ER has the best coffee, son.

They just let you out?

No.

So why am I depressed? That's the million-dollar question, baby, the Tootsie Roll question; not even the owl knows the answer to that one. I don't know either.

All I know is the chronology.

Two years ago, I got into one of the best high schools in Knox: Executive Pre-Professional High School. It's a new school set up to create the leaders of tomorrow; corporate internships are

mandatory; the higher-ups of Merrill Lynch come and speak to classes and distribute travel mugs and stuff.

This billionaire philanthropist named Robberts lets- let's set it up in conjunction with the public school system, like a school within a school-all you have to do to get in is passing a test. Then your whole high school is paid for and you have access to 800 of the smartest, most interesting students in the world- not to mention the teachers and visiting dignitaries.

You can come out of Executive Pre-Professional High School and go right to 17st Street, although that’s not what you should do; what you should do is come out and go to Harvard and then law school.

That’s how you end up being, like, President.

I’ll admit it: I kind of want to be President.

So, this test-they named the Robberts Lutz Philanthropic Exam, in honor of his philanthropies-became fairly important in my life. It became more important than, uh, food, for instance.

I bought the book for it-Robberts Lutz puts out his line of test prep books for his test-and started studying three hours a day.

I was in seventh grade, and I got comfortable with my room for the first time I'd come home with my heavy backpack and toss it on the bed and watch it bounce, toward the pillows as- I-

I-I's sat down in my chair and pulled out my test-prep book.

On my cell phone, I would go to TOOLS: ALARM… and set me up for a two-hour practice exam...

There were five practice exams in the book, and after I did them all, I was thrilled to discover an ad at the back for twelve more Robberts Lutz test prep books…

Joy- I remember- I went to Barnes and Noble; they didn't have all of them in stock-they'd never had anyone ask for all of them, them-so they had to put in an order for me.

But then it was game on. I started taking a practice exam every day.

The questions covered the standard junk that they test you on to determine if you're not an idiot:

Reading comprehension. Ooh. Can you read this selection and tell what kind of tree they're trying to save?

Vocabulary, did you buy a book full of weird words and learn them?

Math- are you able to turn off your mind to the world and fill it with symbols that follow rules?

I made that test my bitch. I mauled the practice exams and slept with the books under my pillow and turned my brain into a fierce machine, a buzz saw that could handle anything. I could feel myself getting smarter, under the light at my desk. I could feel myself filling myself.

Now, I stopped hanging out with a lot of friends when I got into the Executive Pre-Professional mode. I didn't have many friends to begin with-I had the kids who I sat with during lunch, the bare minimum-but once I started carrying flashcards around, they sort of avoided me. I don't know what their problem was; I just wanted to maximize my time. When all of my test-prep books were done, I got a personal tutor to shore me up for the exam. She told me halfway through the sessions that I didn't need her, but kept my mom's $800. I got a 100 on the test, out of 100.

The day I got those test results, a cold, plaintive, late fall Knox day, was my last good day. I've had good moments scattered since then, times when I thought I was better, but that was the last day I felt triumphant. The letter from

Executive Pre-Professional High School came in the mail, and Mom had saved it on the kitchen table for me when I got home from Tae Bo class after school, which was something I intended to keep doing in high school, to have on my extracurricular activity sheet when I applied for college, which would be the next hurdle, the next step.

Me- 'Dariez, guess what's here?'

I threw down my backpack and ran past the Mirror in the living room to the kitchen. There it was: a manila envelope.

The good kind of envelope. If you failed the test, you got a small envelope; if you got in, you got a big one.

'Yes!' I screamed. I tore it open.

I took out the purple-and-gold welcome packet and held it up like the holy grail. I could have used it to start my religion. I could have made, yah' know, love to it. I kissed it and hugged it until Mom said, 'Dariez, stop that.

That's very sick…

How about you call your friends?'

She didn't know, because I never told her, that my friends were a bit estranged. They're sort of ancillary anyway, friends. I mean, they're important- everybody knows that; the TV tells you, but they come and go. You lose one friend; you pick up another. All you have to do is talk to people, and this was back when I could talk to anybody. My friends, when I had them, pretty much just ragged on me and took my seat when I left the room anyway.

Why did I need to call them up?

Except for Kristopher, Kristopher was a real friend; I guess I'd call him my best friend. He was one of the oldest guys in my class, born on that cusp where you can be the youngest person in an older class of the oldest in a younger class, and his parents did the right thing and went with the latter.

He was smart and fearless, with a flop of brown curly hair and the sort of glasses, that made girls like him, square black ones. He had freckles and he talked a lot. When we got together, we would start projects: an alarm clock torn apart and distributed over a wall, a stop-motion video of Lego people having sex, a Web site for pictures of toilets.

I had met him by wandering over to the table during lunch with my head

buried in flashcards, sitting down, having one of his friends ask me what I was doing there, and having him come by, flush with tacos, to rescue me, ask what I was studying. It turned out that he and I were taking the same exam, but he wasn't studying at all-didn't believe in it.

He introduced me to the table conversation about what Princess Zelda would be like in bed-I said she'd be terrible, because she'd been locked up in dungeons since puberty, but Kristopher said that'd make her super-hot.

Kristopher called me that Friday night.

'Want to come over and watch movies?'

'Sure.' I was done with my practice test for the day.

Kristopher lived in a small apartment in a big building in downtown Knox by City Hall. I took the subway in (my mom had to okay it with Kristopher's mom, which was horrifying,) identified myself to Kristopher's paunchy doorman, and took the elevator up to his floor.

Kristopher's mom greeted me and brought me into his ventilated chamber (past his dad, who wrote in a room that resembled a prison cell, occasionally beating his head against his desk, while Kristopher's mom brought him tea) and flopped on his bed, which wasn't yet covered with the sort of stains that would define it in the future. I'm good at flopping on things.

'Hey,' Kristopher was like. 'You want to smoke some pot?'

Oh. So-o this was what watching movies meant. A quick recap of what I knew about drugs: my mom told me never to do them; my dad told me not to do them until after the SATs.

Mom trumped Dad, so I vowed to never do them-but what if someone made me? I thought drugs might be something people did to you, like jabbing you with a needle while you were trying to mind your business.

'What if someone makes me, Mom?' I had asked her; we were having a drug conversation in a playground.

I was ten. 'What if they hold a gun to my head and force me to take the drugs?' 'That's not really how it works, honey,' she answered. 'People take drugs because they want to. You just have to not want to.'

And now here I was with Kristopher, wanting to. His room smelled like certain areas of Central Park, down by the lake, where white guys with dreadlocks played bongos.

My mom hovered in my head.

‘Nah,’ I was like.

‘No problem.’ He opened a pungent bag and put a chunk of the contents of the bag in a fascinating little device that looked like a cigarette but was made of metal. He lit it up with a butane lighter that made a flame approximately as large as my middle finger. He puffed right up against his wall.

‘Don’t you have to open a window?’

‘Nah, it’s my room; I can do what I want.’

‘Doesn’t your mom care?’

‘She has her hands full with Dad.’

The section of wall he smoked against would get discolored over the next two years. Eventually, like the rest of the room, it would get covered up with posters of rappers with gold teeth.

Kristopher took three or four breaths of his metal cigarette and made the room smell musty and hot, then announced:

‘Let’s motivate, son! What do you want to get?’ ‘Action.’ Duh.

I was in seventh grade.

‘All right! You know what I want?’ Kristopher’s eyes lit up. ‘I want a movie with a cliff.’

‘A mountain-climbing one?’

‘It doesn’t have to be about mountain climbing. Just needs at least one scene where some dudes are fighting, and somebody gets thrown off a cliff.’

‘Did you hear about Paul Stojanovich?’

‘Who’s that?’

‘He’s the producer who invented World’s Scariest Police

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‘Who’s that?’

‘He’s the producer who invented World’s Scariest Police Chases and Cops.’

‘No kidding? The host?’

‘No, the producer. The host kicks ass, though.’

Kristopher led the way out of his room and past his father- typing away, wiping sweat, for all intents and purposes

a part of the computer-to his front door, where his mom, who had long dirty blond hair and wore overalls, stopped us and gave us cookies and our coats.

‘I love my life,’ Kristopher said. ‘Bye, Mom.’ We entered the elevator with our mouths full of cookies.

‘Okay, so what were you saying? I love World’s Scariest Police Chases.’ Kristopher swallowed. ‘I love it when the guy is like’ Kristopher put on a stern overenunciated brogue-’These two-bit bandits thought they could turn a blind eye to the law, but the Broward County Sheriff's office showed them the light-and it led them straight to jail.’’

I cracked up, spitting cookie bits everywhere. ‘I’m good at voices. Do you want to hear Jay Leno blowing the devil? I got it from this comedian Bill Hicks.’

‘You never let me finish about Paul Stojanovich!’ I said.

‘Who?’

The elevator arrived in Kristopher’s lobby. ‘The pro-duc-er of World’s Scariest Police Chases.’

‘Oh, right.’ Kristopher threw open the glass lobby door. I followed him into the street, tossed up my hood, and bundled myself in it.

‘He was posing with his fiancée, for like a wedding picture? And they were doing it in Oregon, right next to this big cliff. And the photographer was like ‘Move back, move a little to the left.’ And they moved, and he fell off the cliff.’

‘Oh my God!’ Kristopher shook his head. ‘How do you learn this stuff?’ ‘The Internet.’ I smiled.

‘That is too good. What happened to the girl?’

‘She was fine.’

‘She should sue the photographer. Did they sue him?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘They better. I would sue. You know, Dariez’- Kristopher looked at me steadily, his eyes red but so alive and bright-’ I’m going to be a lawyer.’

‘Oh, yeah?’

‘Yeah. Screw my dad. He doesn’t make any money. He’s miserable. The only reason we even live where we do is that my mom’s brother is a lawyer and they got the apartment way back when. It used to be my uncle’s apartment. Now he does work for the building, so they cut

Mom a deal. Everything good I have is due to lawyers.'

'I think I might want to be one too,' I said.

'Why not? You make money!'

'Yeah.' I looked up. We were on a bright, cold, gray Knox sidewalk. Everything cost so much money. I looked at the hot dog man, the cheapest thing around- you wouldn't get away from him without forking over three or four bucks.

'We should be lawyers together,' Kristopher said. 'Pardis and... what's your last name?'

'Gilner.'

'Pardis and Gilner.'

'Okay.'

I’m awakened by a guy in light blue scrubs taking my blood. That’s an interesting way to wake up. The guy comes into the room with cart-carts are very popular here-as light creeps through the blinds.

‘I need your blood. For downstairs.’

‘Uh, okay.’

I present my arm. I’m too beating to ask any questions. He takes a little bit of blood expertly through the back of my hand under my middle-finger knuckle-doesn’t leave any kind of mark-and rolls along, leaving

Muqtada asleep, or awake and paralyzed by life; it’s tough to tell. I want to get more sleep, but once you’ve been stuck, you’re inclined to get up, so I move

out of bed and take a shower with the hospital-provided towels and my parent-provided shampoo and the generic soap that I pump out of the wall. The shower is searing and wonderful, but I don't want to stay too long- I have to break my habit of languishing in the bathroom-so I dry off and drop my stuff back at the nurses' station. Smitty isn't there; instead, there's a big guy who introduces himself as Harold and tells me to dump the towels in a hamper that looks just like a garbage can by the dining room, something that I know I've seen Humble and Jim dump apple cores and banana peels into.

'Hey, buddy, you're up!' Armelio calls out, bounding down the hall at me. 'How'd you sleep?'

'Not good. I needed a shot.'

‘That’s okay, buddy, we all need shots once in a while.’

‘Heh.’ I crack the day’s first smile. Armelio uncorks one of his own.

‘It’s time to wake everyone up for vitals,’ he says, treading down the hall. ‘All right, everybody! Vitals!

Time to take your vitals!’

A caravan of my fellow bleary mental patients- or wait, I think we’re called in-patient psychiatric treatment recipients, technically emerge from their compartments, rubbing their eyes and staggering as if they have a job to get to and they just need that first cup of coffee. Surprised by my good fortune, I put myself at the front of the line and become the first to get my blood pressure and

pulse taken. 120 / 80. I continue to be the picture of health.

‘Dariez?’ Harold, the big guy, asks when everyone is done.

We shook hands, maintaining our stride, nearly clotheslining a frilled-up little girl walking in the other direction. Then we turned up Church Street and rented this reality DVD, Life Against Death, which had a lot of cliffs, as well as fires, animal attacks, and skydiving accidents. I sat propped in Kristopher’s bed, him smoking pot and me refusing, feeding off him, telling him that I thought I was getting a contact high when really- I was just feeling like I had stepped into a new groove. At cool parts of Life Against Death, we paused and zoomed in: on the hearts of explosions, spinning wheels after truck crashes, and one guy freaking

out in a gorilla cage and getting a rock thrown at him. We talked about making our movie someday. I didn't go to sleep until four, but I was in someone else's house, so I woke up early-at eight with that crazy sleeping- at- someone- else's house energy. I passed Kristopher's father at his computer and grabbed a book off their shelf in the living room- Latin Roots. I studied Latin Roots all morning, for the test.

We kept doing it. It became a regular thing. We never formalized it, never named it… but on Fridays, Kristopher would call and ask me to watch movies. I think he was lonely. Whatever he was, he became the one person I wanted to stay in touch with after junior high. And now, a year later, I was in my kitchen holding my acceptance letter and wondering if he had one too.

‘I’ll call Kristopher,’ I told Mom.

Part: 9

‘Yeah?’

‘You haven’t been filling out your menus.’ ‘Every day, you’re supposed to put down what sort of meals you want. On one of these.’

‘What are those?’ She holds up what looks like a placemat, with columns of food: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner. ‘You should have gotten this in the welcome packet the nurse gave you.’ Ah, the one

I completely ignored it. I nod. ‘I just… didn’t…’

‘It’s okay, but if you don’t mark up your menus, you’re going to get a meal we pick for you every time. So, fill one out for lunch and dinner today. For breakfast,

you’re going to have to have one of the omelets.’

I put my elbows down on the desk and eye the menu choices: hamburger, fish nuggets, French-cut beans, turkey with stuffing, fresh fruit, pudding, oatmeal, orange juice, milk 4oz, milk 8oz, 2% milk, skim milk, tea, coffee, hot chocolate, split pea soup, minestrone-soup, fruit salad, cottage cheese, bagel, cream cheese, butter, jelly… highly processed food. I’m not going to have a problem eating this. My eyes swim over the choices.

‘Circle what you want,’ Harold explains. I start circling.

‘If you want two of anything, put two-x by it.’ I start putting 2x’s.

I’m asking for something that no politician is going to provide, something that probably you only get in preschool. I’m asking for preschool.

I wish the world were like this if I just woke up and marked the food I’d be eating, and it came to me later in the day.

I suppose- and asked- it is like that, except you have to pay for whatever you want to eat, so maybe what I’m asking for is communism, but I think it’s deeper than communism-I’m asking for simplicity, for purity, and ease of choice and no pressure.

‘After breakfast, fill one out for tomorrow,’ Harold says as I hand in my menu.

Breakfast comes to the dining room and the omelet is like a science

experiment: is the lack of cheese explained by the mysterious holes that dot the alleged egg?

‘Your first omelet,’ Jim says. Today, for a change, I sit with him instead of Humble. Johnny rounds out the table.

‘It’s gross.’ I pick at it.

‘It’s like a rite of passage,’ Tim says. He speaks slowly and without any accents in his words.

‘‘Everyone must eat the omelet.’’ ‘Yeah, you’re in now,’ Jim says.

‘Huh.’ Tim exhales.

‘How did everybody sleep?’

I try… Night joy- she is in the same room as me…

‘I’m anxious, really anxious,’ Joy says.

‘Why?’

‘I’ve got that interview tomorrow, with the adult home.’ ‘What’s that?’

‘Huh.’ Joy exhales. ‘It’s where people like us live.’

‘It’s a place like this, basically, except you have to hold a job,’ Joy explains. ‘You don’t need a pass to leave; you can leave whenever you want, but you have to prove you’re employed and be back by seven o’clock.’

‘Wait, you can leave here with a pass?’

‘Yeah, once you have five days inside, they have to give you a pass if you ask for it.’ ‘I’m going to try and be out in five days.’

‘Huh,’ Joy exhales. ‘Good luck.’

I start in on my orange, which is about two hundred times more edible than the omelet. ‘Why are you nervous about the interview?’ I ask Joy. ‘Anxious, not nervous. It’s different. It’s medical.’

‘Why are you anxious, then? I’m sure you’ll get in.’

‘You can’t be sure of a thing like that. And if I mess it up, I’ve got problems: I’ve been here too long; my coverage isn’t going to last. Once you’re giving the tours, it's timed to leave.’ He takes a slow bite of oatmeal. ‘The last place wouldn’t let me in because I’m too much of a picky eater. It’s not like- this place. You can’t pick your food.’

‘So now you know what not to say!’ I point out.

‘Yeah, that’s true.’

‘See, when you mess something up,’ I muse, ‘you learn for the next delight. It’s when people compliment you that you’re in trouble. That means they expect you to keep it up.’

Joy nods. ‘Very, very true.’

‘Huh, yeah,’ Joy says. ‘My mom was always complimenting me, and look how I turned out.’

‘This kid has some promise.’ Joy laughs. ‘He’s on the level.’

‘Huh, yeah, on the level. You play guitar, kid?’

‘No.’

‘Joy here’s a great guitarist,’ Joy says. ‘Great. He had a deal in the eighties.’

‘Oh yeah?’

‘Sh-hh,’ Joy says. ‘It isn't nothing.’’

Joy continues: ‘He can play better than the guy they bring in here to play for us. But he’s a cool guy, that guy.’

‘Yeah, he’s on the level.’

‘He’s on the level. Is he coming in today for the group?’

‘That’s tomorrow. Today is art.’

‘With Lacey.’

‘Right.’

Joy sips his coffee. ‘If there wasn’t coffee on this earth, I’d be dead.’

I scan the room: everyone’s here but Solomon, the Anorexics (who I’ve now seen peeking out of their rooms like, literally, skeletons in closets,) and Joy.

I wonder where she is. She didn’t show up for vitals. Maybe she’s out on a pass.

I hope she’ll be around tonight for our date. Technically, it’ll be my first date. ‘You know, I’ll tell you why I’m anxious,’ Joy pipes up, leaning in over his coffee. ‘It’s this stupid shirt.’ He pushes forward his Marvin the Martian WORLD DOMINATOR sweatshirt. ‘How'd I going to… interview in this?’

‘Huh.’ Joy exhales. ‘Never under-shaft the power of Marvin.’

‘Sh-hh, man. I’m serious.’ ‘I have shirts,’ I say.

‘What?’ Joy looks up.

‘I have shirts.

I’ll lend you a shirt.’

‘What? You would do that?’

‘Sure. What size are you?’

‘Medium. What are you?’

‘Uh, child’s large.’

‘What is that in normal?’ Joy turns to Joy.

‘I didn’t even know children had sizes,’ Joy says. ‘I think it would fit,’ I stand up. Joy gets up next to me and, although his posture is way different-backward, really-he looks like a decent match.

‘I have a blue-collared shirt that my mom makes me wear to church every week. I can have her bring it.’

‘Today? The interview’s tomorrow.’

‘Yeah. No problem. She’s two blocks away.’

‘You would do that for me?’

‘Sure!’

‘All right,’ Joy says. We shake hands. ‘You’re really on the level. You’re a good person.’ We look into each other’s eyes as we shake. His are still full of death and horror, but in them I see my face reflected, and inside my tiny eyes inside his, I think I see some hope.

‘Good person,’ Joy echoes. Joy sits down. I put my tray back in the cart and Humble comes up behind me.

‘You didn’t sit with me, I’m very hurt,’ he says. ‘I might have to jump you for your lunch money later.’

Joy leads me into the bright hall with his odd gait.

‘Everybody’s in the dining room right now.’ He gestures as we go down the sideways hall, the one that branches off of the one I entered. I look left- there’s the dining room, painted blue, overlooked by a television, full of circular tables, separated from the hall by that glass with the square wire mesh in it. Inside, the tables have been pushed aside, and a panoply of people sit in a loose circle.

I can’t even process them: they’re the moteliest collection of people I’ve ever seen. An old man with a crazy beard (what happened to the shaving?) rocks back and forth; a gigantic black woman rests her chin on a cane; a burned-out-looking guy with long blond hair puts his hand through it; a stocky bald man with slatted eyes scratches his armpit and frowns; an older woman with glasses mimes what appears to be an eagle,

talking, before turning and inspecting the back of her chair. The small man I saw in the hall twitches his leg. A girl with a streak of blue in her dark hair slumps over her chair like she’s more messed up than the others; a big girl with a wan frown leans back and twiddles her thumbs; a black kid with wire-rim glasses sits perfectly still, and hey there's from downstairs. He’s still got his stained shirt on, and he’s looking up at the lights. They must have processed him quickly because he’s a return visitor.

You can tell who the meeting leader is: a thin woman with short dark hair. Out of a dozen or so people, she’s the only one in a suit. Some people aren’t even in their clothes, but in dark blue robes, loose and V-necked at the top.

‘Hey, man,’ Joy says, pulling me down the hall. ‘If you’re interested you can just sit in on the meeting.’

‘No, I-’

‘I’m doing the tour, so I can get out.’

‘Heh.’

‘Now, smokers are at-wait, you don’t smoke, do you?’

‘Uh … I smoke some things-’

‘Cigarettes, I’m talking about.’

‘No, I don’t.’

‘Did they ask if you did?’

‘No.’ ‘That’s probably because you’re underage. How old are you?’

‘Fifteen.’

‘Jesus! Okay, well, smokes are after breakfast, after lunch, at three in the afternoon, after dinner, and before lights out. Five times a day.’

‘All right.’

‘Most people smoke. And if you had told them you smoked, they might have given you cigarettes.’ ‘Darn.’ I chuckle.

‘It’s one of the only hospitals left that lets you smoke.’ Joy points behind us. ‘The smoking lounge is in the other hall.’

We come across a third hall, perpendicular to the one we’re in. I see that Six North is shaped like an H: where you enter is at the bottom of the left leg; the nurses’ office is at the junction of the left leg and the centerline; the dining room is at the intersection of the center

line and the right leg, and the rooms line the left and right legs.

We're passing them now, going toward the top right of the *H*: they're simple doors with slots outside filled with slips of paper that say who's living in them and who their doctor is. The patients are listed by their first names; the doctors by their last. I see Betty / Dr. Mahmoud, Peter / Dr. Mulleins, Hannah / Dr. Mahmoud.

'Where's my room?'

'They probably don't have it set up yet; they'll have it after lunch for sure. Okay, so here's the shower-' He points to the right, to a door with a pink sliding plastic block on it between the words VACANT and OCCUPIED.

‘When you’re inside, you’re supposed to put it to OCCUPIED, but people still don’t pay any attention, and there’s no lock on the door, so I like to keep close to the door. It’s tough, ‘because the water doesn’t reach.’

‘How do I make it say ‘Occupied’? From inside?’

‘No, here.’ Joy slides the block. It covers up VACANT and only OCCUPIED appears.

‘That’s pretty cool.’ I push it back. It’s a simple system, but I wouldn’t know if Joy hadn’t shown me.

‘Is there a guys’ bathroom and a girls’ bathroom?’ ‘It’s not a bathroom, it’s a shower. You have your bathroom in your room. But it’s unisex, yeah. There’s a shower in the other hall too ’we keep

walking-’ but I wouldn’t use it. It bothers Solomon.’ ‘Who’s Solomon?’

We come to the end of the hall. The windows have two panes of glass with blinds, somehow, between them.

Outside it’s a cloud-spattered May Knox day. Chairs line the dead end. As we approach, a wilted little girl with blond hair and cuts on her face looks up from a pad of something and scurries into a nearby room.

‘They show movies here sometimes.’ Joy shrugs.

‘Sometimes at the other end by the smoking lounge.’

‘Uh-huh. Who was that?’

‘the real Joy- they moved her in from the teen.’

We turn around.

‘Medications are given out after breakfast, after lunch, and before bed.

We take them over there.’ Joy points to a desk across from the dining room, where Smitty sits, pouring soda. ‘That’s the nurses' station; the other place is the nurses’ office. All your lockers and stuff are behind the nurses’ station.’

‘They took my cell phone.’

‘Yeah, they do that.’

‘What about e-mail?’

‘What?’ We’re back by the dining room. I slow my pace. Inside, the stocky bald man with squinty eyes who was frowning is speaking slowly and plaintively: ‘…Some people here who treat you like they have no respect for you as a human being, which I take personal

offense to, and just because I went to my doctor and told him, ‘I’m not afraid of dying; I’m only afraid of living, and I want to put a bayonet through my stomach, ’that doesn’t mean I’m afraid of any of you.’

‘Let’s concentrate on our discussion of things that make us happy, Humble,’ says the psychologist.

‘And I know about psychologists when they’re writing down what you’re saying they’re writing down how much money they’re going to get when they sell their latest yacht because they’re all yuppies with no respect…’

‘C’mon,’ Joy taps me.

‘Is his name Humble?’

‘Yeah. He’s from Bensonhurst.’ Bensonhurst is a particularly retro section

of Knox, an Italian and Jewish neighborhood where a girl can walk down the street and have a car full of guys cruise up to her: Hey baby, you want to ride?

‘Where are you from?’ I ask.

‘Sheepshead Bay.’ That’s another old- times Knox ‘hood.

Russian. All these parts are far out.

‘I’m from here,’ I say.

‘What, this neighborhood? This neighborhood is nice.’ ‘Yeah, I guess so.’

‘Man, I’d give my one remaining ball to live here, I tell you that. I’m trying to get into a home around here, at the Y. Anyway, there's the phone.’ He points to our left. There’s a payphone with a yellow receiver. ‘It’s on until ten at night,’ he

says. ‘The number to call back is written right on it, and it’s on your sheet too, if you need people to call back. If someone calls for you, don’t worry, someone find you.’ Joy stops a second.

‘That’s it.’

It’s very simple.

‘What do we do here?’ I ask. ‘They have activities; a guy comes and plays guitar. Lacey comes in with arts and crafts. Other than that, you know, just take phone calls; try and get out, really.’

‘How long do people stay?’

‘Kid like you got money, got a family, you’ll be out in a few days.’

I get the feeling I don’t know how I know the rules of mental ward etiquette; maybe I was born with them; maybe I knew I’d end up here but I get the feeling

that one big no-no in this place is asking people how they got here. I look at Joy's deep-sunk eyes.

It'd be a little like walking up to somebody in prison and going

'So? So? What's up, huh? Did-jah kill somebody? Did-ja?'

But I also get the impression that you can volunteer the reasons you got here at any Joy and no one will judge; no one will think you're too crazy or not crazy enough, and that's how you make friends. After all, what else is there to talk about? So, I tell Joy: 'I'm here because I suffer from serious depression.'

'Me too.' He nods. 'Since I was fifteen.' And his eyes shine with blackness and horror. We shake hands.

‘Hey, Dariez!’ Smitty says from his desk. ‘We got your room ready; you want to meet your roommate?’ Chapter Twenty-One My roommate is Joy.

He looks about like what you’d expect for a guy named Joy: big; straight gray beard; wide, wrinkled dark face; glasses with white plastic rims. He doesn’t have any clothes because he’s in a dark blue robe, which smells intensely of body odor. Not that it’s easy to notice any of this stuff at first, because when I go into the room, he’s burrowed into bed.

Smitty flicks on the light. ‘Joy! It’s almost lunch! Wake up.

You have a new roommate!’

The first thing she said is…

‘This young girl looked at me and said they're all named JOY here, it all just mental illnesses.’

‘Mm?’ He peers out from his sheets. ‘Who is?’ ‘I’m Dariez,’ I say, hands in my pockets.

‘Mm, It is very cold here, Dariez. You did not like it.’

‘Joy, weren’t the men in here to fix the heat?’

‘Yes, they fix yesterday, very cold. Fix today, tonight very cold.’

‘It’s spring, buddy; it doesn’t get cold.’

‘Mm.’

‘Dariez, that’s you over there.’

The bed in the far corner is made up for me if you can call it that. It’s the

sparsest bed I've ever seen: small and pale yellow with a sheet, a top sheet, and one pillow. No blanket, no stuffed animals, no drawers below, no patterns, no candles, no headboard. This reflects the style of the room, which has a window (encased blinds again,) a radiator under paneling, two beds, a table between the two beds with two funny-shaped hospital pitchers of water on top, lights, a closet, and a bathroom.

There aren't any patterns on the wall; only the ceiling has porous tiles that could be fun to look at. I check the closet. Joy has a tired pair of pants on the bottom shelf. The rest of the space is mine. I take off my hoodie and stuff it in there. 'Okay?' Smitty asks. 'Lunch in five minutes.' He leaves the door open. I sit down on my bed.

‘Please close the door, please,’ Joy says. I close it, come back. He looks right through me. ‘Thank you.’ ‘What do we have for lunch?’

I ask.

‘Hm.’

I’m not sure how to respond to that. I asked him a- question. ‘Ah … Is the food good?’

‘Mm.’

‘Ah… Where are you from?’

‘Egypt,’ he says in a clipped voice, and it’s the first word I’ve heard him say that he sounds happy with. ‘Where are you from?

Your family?’ ‘White. German and Irish and Czech. A little Jewish, we think. But I’m Christian, I guess.’

That reminds me: in this sparse room, is it possible that the Gideons have placed a Bible? They put one in every motel in the world; they should have gotten to this place. I check the drawers, under the pitchers of water: nope. Out of range of the Gideons.

This is serious.

‘Mm,’ Joy says. ‘What you look for? There is nothing.’ He keeps staring.

I want to lie down, to get the sleep I couldn’t get last night, but something about the way my roommate is lying there makes me want to leave, to walk around. Maybe it’ll be good to be with someone like him, someone who seems worse off than me. I never really considered it, but there are people worse off than me, right? I mean, some people are homeless and can’t get out of bed and

are never going to be able to hold a job and, in Joy's case, have serious problems with temperature, all because their brains are broken. Compared to them I'm… well, I'm a spoiled rich kid.

Which is another something to feel bad about?

So, who's worse off?

I go out into the hall and almost bash headlong into one of the giant metal racks of trays. The rack gives off heat and smells of fresh cooked salty food and is being wheeled along by an attendant in a skullcap.

'Careful!' he yells at me.

Oh, no. Now I have to eat. This will be the first time that they'll see how bad things are with me- I couldn't eat that egg downstairs and can't eat anything

now. What if I get stressed and the man pulls his rope in my stomach and I throw up in the dining room? That'll be a fine entrance.

'Lunch!' the little man with the almost harelip calls down the hall. He pops out of the dining room, walks down to the far window and back, and knocks on everyone's door, even if they're awake and right in his face. 'Come on, Candace! Let's go, Bernie! C'mon, Kate! times to eat! Come on, Joy!'

'That's Armelio,' a voice says behind me. I turn; it's

Joy in his Martian sweatshirt. 'They call him the President. He runs the whole floor.' 'Hi, who're yah?' Armelio asks as he passes.

'Dariez.' I shake his hand.

‘Great to meet you! All right! People! We have a new person here! Excellent, buddy! My new buddy. That’s great! Time for lunch! Solomon, come out of your room, don’t give any trouble, come and eat! Everybody’s got to eat!’

I move into the dining room with Armelio bellowing and cast myself at a seat next to the bald man, Humble, who is still talking about psychologists and yachts.

‘Come this way, we’re going to take your vitals,’ Smitty says, seating me in the small office. He takes my blood pressure off a rolling cart and my pulse with delicate fingers. He writes down on a sheet in front of him: 120 / 80.

‘One-twenty-over-eighty, that’s dead normal, isn’t it?’ I ask.

‘Yeah.’ Smitty smiles. ‘But we prefer to live normal.’ He wraps up the blood pressure gauge. ‘Stay right here, we’ll send a nurse in to talk to you.’

‘A nurse? What are you?’

‘I’m one of the day directors on the floor.’

‘And what is this floor, exactly…?’

‘It’s a short-term facility for adult psychiatric.’

‘So, like, a mental ward?’

‘Not an award, a hospital. The nurse will answer any questions.’

He steps out of the office, leaving me with a form: name, address, Social Security number. Then-wait-

I’ve seen this before! It’s the question from Dr. Jarnerny’s office:

Feeling that you are unable to cope with daily life. 1) Never, 2) Some days, 3) Nearly every day, 4) All the times.

What the hell, I'm in the hospital; I put 4's down the line there are about twenty prompts-except for the lines about self-mutilation, drinking, and drug use (I am not putting anything about pot, that's just the rule, told to me by Kristopher-you don't ever, ever admit to smoking pot, not to doctors, not to teachers, not to anyone in authority no matter how much you trust them; they can always report you to the FBI Pot-Smoking List.)

As I'm getting done, a squat black nurse with a kind wide smile and tightly braided hair steps in. She introduces herself with a thick West Indian accent. 'Dariez, I am Monica, a nurse on the floor here. I am going to ask you a couple of

questions about what you're feeling and find out how to help you.'

'Yeah, uh… 'It's the joy of time to state my case. 'I came in because I was really freaked out, you know, and I checked in downstairs, but I wasn't sure where I was going, and now that

I'm here, I don't know if I really-'

'Hold on, honey, let me show you something.' Nurse Monica stands over me, although she's so short that we're almost the same height, and pulls out a photocopy of the form my mom signed downstairs only an hour before.

'You see that there? That signature says that you have been voluntarily admitted to psychiatric care at UMPC Hospital, yes?'

'Yeah…'

‘And see? It says that you will be discharged at the discretion of the doctor once he has come up with your discharge plan.’

‘I’m not getting out of here until a doctor lets me out!’

‘Now, wait.’ She sits. ‘If you feel that this is not the place for you, after five days you can write a letter-we call it the Five-Day Letter-explaining why you feel that you do not belong here, and we will review that and allow you to leave if you qualify.’ She smiles.

‘So, I’m here for at least five days?’

‘Somebody’s people are just here for two. Not more than thirty.’

Ho-boy. Well, not much to say about it. That is my mom’s signature. I sit

back in my chair. This morning I was a pretty functional teenager. Now I'm a mental patient. But you know, I wasn't that functional. Is that better? No, this is worse. This is a lot- 'Let's talk about how you came to be here,' Monica prompts.

I give her the rap.

'When was the last you were hospitalized?'

'Like, four years ago. I was in a sledding accident.'

'So, you've never been hospitalized for mental difficulties before.'

'Uh, nope.'

'Good… Now I want you to look at this chart. Do you see here?'

There's a little scale of 0-10 on a sheet in front of her. 'This is the chart of

physical pain. I want you to tell me, right now, from a scale of zero to ten, are you experiencing any physical pain?'

I look closer at the sheet. Below the zero, it says no pain and below the ten it says unbearable excruciating pain. I have to bite my tongue.

'Zero,' I manage.

'All right, now, here's a very important question'-she leans in did you try to do anything to hurt yourself before you came here?'

I sense that this is an important question. It might be the kind of question that determines whether I get a normal room with a TV or a special room with straps.

'No,' I enunciate.

‘You didn’t take anything? You didn’t try for the good sleep?’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘The good sleep, you know? That’s what they call it. When you take many pills and drink alcohol and…’ ‘Ah, no,’ I say. ‘Well, that’s good,’ she says. ‘We don’t want to lose you. Think of your talents. Think of all the tools you have. From your hands to your feet.’

I do think about them. I think about my hands signing forms and my feet running, flexing up and down, as I sprint to some class I’m late for. I am good at certain things.

‘So right- now we are getting ready for lunch,’ Monica says.

‘Are you a Christian?’

‘Uh, yes.’

‘Are you vegetarian?’

‘No.’

‘So, no specific diet restrictions, good. I need you to read these rules.’ She drops four sheets of paper in front of me. ‘They’re about conduct on the floor.’ My eye falls on 7…) Patients are expected to remain clean-shaven. Shaving will be supervised by an attendant every day after breakfast.

‘I am not sure if you notice, but do you see what that first item is on the list?’

‘Uh … ‘No cell phones on the floor?’’

‘That’s right. Do you have one?’

I feel it in my pocket. I don’t want to lose it. It’s one of the only things that’s making me right now. Without my cell

phone, who will I be? I won't have any friends because I don't have their numbers memorized. I'll barely have a family since I don't know their cell phone numbers, just their home line. I'll be like an animal. 'Please give it here,' Monica says. 'We will keep it in your locker until your discharge, or you can have visitors take care of it.' I put it on the table.

'Please turn it off.'

I flip it open two new voicemails, who are they? …And hold END. Bye-bye, little phone.

'Now, this is very important; do you have anything sharp on your person?'

'My keys?'

'Same as the phone. We keep those.'

I plop them in a heap on the table; Monica sweeps them into a tray like an airport security worker.

‘Wonderful-do you have anything else you can think of?’

Monica, I’m down to my wallet and the clothes on my back. I shake my head.

‘Great, now hold on.’ She gets up. ‘We’re going to have Joy give you a tour.’

Monieec nods at me, keeps my charts, leaves me to review the papers, and goes into the hall. She returns a minute later with a gaunt, hollow man with big circles under his eyes and a nose that looks like it’s been broken in about three places.

In contrast to floor policy, scruff lines his chin. He’s older but still has all

his hair, a stately gray mop, combed half-heartedly. And he carries himself a little weird, leaning back as if he were on a headrest.

‘Jesus, you’re a kid!’ he says, curling his mouth. He reaches out a hand for me and his hand comes out sort of sideways, thumb crooked up.

‘I’m Joy,’ he says.

‘That is not your name, it's here’s, yet you can have it too.’

His sweatshirt has Marvin the Martian on it and says, WORLD DOMINATOR.

‘Dariez.’ I stand up.

He nods, and his Adam’s apple, which has some extra gray whiskers on it, moves. ‘You ready for the grand tour?’

Part: 10

Okay, so check it out. We're going to play a different game today.

Okay.

I ask you a question and you ask me a question.

Do we answer them?

It's up to you, but no matter what, you have to finish with a question.

Here we go. Are you ready?

Yeah- I said…

Finish with a question.

Are you stupid?

Uh, no... Are you?

There you go. Do you think I'm gross looking?

No. You look awesome.

What's your question?

Why'd you invited me here?

I thought it was nice that- you loaned Bobby your shirt.

Don't you think this is a good way to get to know someone?

Sure...

Have you played this before?

Not in here...

Are you a virgin?

So...

How long have you been here?

Nice transition, Craig.

Twenty-one days.

Who dragged you here?

I checked myself in, I guess.

Kind of, by accident.

The suicide hotline said to come.

Why are you here so long?

They think I might cut myself again.

Why'd you called the suicide hotline?

I guess...

Maybe I didn't want to kill myself.

But I kind of did.

Does that make sense?

So, where do you go?

Executive Pre-Professional.

You?

Delfin…

You're not some sort of school uniform perv, are you?

Do you guys wear uniforms?

I knew it.

Okay, sorry, I'm going to invade your personal space for one second.

Why?

- What are you doing?
- I'm just...
- Ow, you shocked me.
- Make a wish.
- Did to be with you…

Aww, she rolled her eyes and fell into his arms.

Joy leads me into the bright hall with his odd gait.

‘Everybody’s in the dining room right now, sucking on winners’ and food and crap that just tastes like terr-ed.’

He gestures as we go down the sideways hall, the one that branches off of the one I arrived at.

I look left- there’s the dining room.

Its- its painted green, overlooked by a television, its old from like the 50’s why they think this is still good we don’t know, yet they say there more to live on the inside, then malting your brain down with cartoons, and- and like it’s made of

wood, yet again the year is 2020, get with the times.

There are full of circular tables… over there wavy… see- see them all there?

Like- like all detached from the hall by, that glass with the square wire mesh in it- and whatnot.

Private, yet over there at the tables have been- awl- pushed apart, and a panoply of people sit in a loose circle.

I can’t even process them: they’re the moteliest collection of young kids I’ve ever seen, all 13- 17.

I see that girl she is Rocks back and forth; I did not get why, and she was not saying anything to anyone.

A gigantic black girl rests her chin on a cane; a burned-out looking boy with long blond hair puts his hand

through it; a stocky balding boy with slatted eyes scratches his armpit and frowns; an older girl with glasses mimes what appears to be an eagle, talking, before turning and inspecting the back of her chair.

The small boy I saw in the hall twitches his leg.

A girl with a streak of blue in her dark hair slumps over her chair like she's perceptibly more messed up than the others…

…A big girl with a wan frown leans back and twiddles her thumbs…

A black kid with wire-rim glasses sits perfectly still, and hey there's Jim from downstairs, showing yet another new girl around.

He’s still got his stained shirt on, and he’s looking up at the lights.

They must have processed him quickly because he’s a return visitor.

You can tell whom the meeting leader is and that would-be Jim: a thin girl with now short dark hair, over the fact she cut in a day of going crayon herself- over a boyfriend.

Out of a dozen or so-o individuals, she’s the only one in a suit- why he doesn’t even know.

Some kids at UMPC aren’t even in their clothes, other in the dress given for they don’t have anything good to wear, but in white robes, some girls are in after bath time, like loose and V-necked at the top.

‘Hey, boy,’ Joy says, pulling me down the hall, you look cute in that thing, and show a little more than what aloud to me up top, showing some butt to yet that is just her, cute and crazy, yet moody.

She whispered I don’t be underwire does that turn you on a little boy?

(Galp) he was all sheepish…

‘If you’re interested you can just sit in on the meeting… you can sit with me, she holds his hand.’

‘um- she shushes him… saying don’t be shy…’

‘I’m doing the tour, so I can get out… your mine, I already said

I want YOU, little boy!’

‘Heh- a- a-okay.’ He would not make eye contact with her, and her green eyes.

How old are you- he asked her- ‘Fifteen?’

‘Jesus! Me too- Okay, well, I see you after breakfast, after lunch, at three in the afternoon, after dinner, and you're my roommate, and before lights out, I am sure to read you a story and tuck you in- I like you.

(She was falling-)

‘All right.’ He said.

We come across a third hall, perpendicular to the one we’re in… saying time to show you my room… hope you love it.

I see that Six North is shaped like an H: where you enter is at the bottom of the left leg…

The nurses' office is at the junction of the left leg, and the centerline; the dining room is at the intersection of the center line, and the right leg and the rooms line the left and right legs.

We're passing them now, going toward the top right of the *H*: they're simple doors with slots outside filled with slips of paper that say who's living in them and who their doctor is.

The patients are listed by their first names; the doctors by their last. I see Betty-Dr. Mahmoud, Peter Dr. Mullens, and -Dr. Mahjah.

And here too…

'Where's my room?'

‘They probably don’t have it set up yet; they’ll have it after lunch for sure.

Okay, so here’s the shower… if you look in there you see your little girlfriend all naked… said Jimi,’ He points to the right, to a door with a rosy sliding plastic block on it between the words VACANT and OCCUPIED.

‘When you’re inside, you’re supposed to put it to OCCUPIED, but kids still don’t pay any attention, and there’s no lock on the door, so-o I like-like to keep close to the door. It’s tough because the water doesn’t reach.’

‘How do I make it say ‘Occupied’? From inside?’

Why you afraid she walks in and sees your little pecker?

Um- he blushes…

‘No, here.’ Joy slides the block. It covers up VACANT and only OCCUPIED appears.

‘That’s pretty cool.’

I push it back. It’s a simple system, but I wouldn’t know if Joy hadn’t shown me.

‘Is there a boy’s bathroom and a girls’ bathroom?’

You have one in your room- no sex you’re on camera- yet not in there…

You have your bathroom in your room. it’s a shower- it just a crapper and sink- ‘It’s not much of a bathroom…

But it’s unisex, yeah… like the room, she wanted to be with you so-o bad… they said okay… I think you would be good for each other…

There’s a shower in the other hall too’-we keep walking- ’but I wouldn’t use it. It bothers Solomon.’

‘Who’s Solomon?’

We come to the end of the hall. The windows have two panes of glass with blinds, somehow, between them.

Outside it’s a cloud-spattered May Knox day.

Chairs line the dead end. As we approach, a wilted little girl with blond hair and cuts on her face looks up from a pad of something and scurries into a nearby room. ‘They show movies here somebody’s.’

Joy shrugs.

‘Sometimes- at the other end by the smoking lounge.’

‘Uh-huh. Who was that?’

‘Joy. They moved her in from the teen.’ We turn around.

‘Medications are given out after breakfast, after lunch, and before bed. We take them over there.’ Joy points to a desk across from the dining room, where Paullie sits, pouring soda.

‘That’s the nurses ‘station; the other place is the nurses’ office.

All your lockers and stuff are behind the nurses’ station.’

‘They took my cell phone.’

‘Yeah, they do that.’ ‘What about e-mail?’

No.

‘What?’ We’re back by the dining room.

I slow my pace. Inside, the stocky bald boy with squinty eyes who was frowning is speaking slowly and plaintively:

Some kids here who treat you like they have no respect for you as a hobby being, which I take personal offense to, and just for the reasons that, I-I-I- went to my doctor and told him…

‘I’m not afraid of dying…

I’m only afraid of living, and I want to put a bayonet through my belly,’ that doesn’t mean I’m scared of any of you.’

‘Let’s concentrate on our discussion of things that make us happy, Self-effacing- and sweet,’ says the psychologist.

‘And I know about psychologists when they’re writing down what you’re saying they’re writing down how much money they’re going to get when they sell their latest yacht because they’re all yuppies with no respect…’

‘Come’ on,’ Joy taps me.

‘Is his name Humble?’

‘Yeah. He’s from Bensonhurst.’

Bensonhurst is a particularly retro section of Knox, an Italian and Jewish neighborhood where a girl can walk down the street and have a car full of boys cruise up to her: Hey baby, you want to ride?

‘Where are you from?’ I ask.

‘Sheepshead Bay.’ That’s another old- Knox ‘hood.

Russian. All these parts are far out.

‘I’m from here,’ I say.

‘What, this neighborhood? This neighborhood is nice.’ ‘Yeah,

I guess so.’

‘Girl, I’d give my one remaining ball to live here, I tell you that. I’m trying to get into a home around here, at the- Y.

Anyway, there's the phone.’

He points to our left.

There’s a payphone with a cream receiver.

‘It’s on until ten at night,’ he says.

‘The number to call back is written right on it, and it’s on your sheet

too, if you need kids to call back. If someone calls for you, don't worry, someone will find you.' Joy stops a second.

'That's it.'

It's very simple.

'What do we do here?' I ask.

'They have activities; a boy comes and plays guitar. Lacey comes in with arts and crafts. Other than that, you know, just take phone calls; try and get out, really.'

'How long do kids stay?'

'Kid like you got money, got a family, you'll be out in a few days.'

I look at Joy's deep-sunk eyes.

I get the feeling I don't know how I know the rules of mental ward etiquette;

maybe I was born with them; maybe, I knew I'd end up here but I get the feeling that one big no-no in this place is asking kids how they got here.

It'd be a little like walking up to somebody in prison and going 'So? So? What's up, huh? Did-ja kill somebody?

Did-ja?'

But I also get the impression that you can volunteer the reasons you got here at any time and no one will judge; no one will think you're too crazy or not crazy enough, and that's how you make friends. After all, what else is there to talk about? So, I tell Joy: 'I'm here because I suffer from serious depression.'

'Me too.' He nods. 'Since I was fifteen.' And his eyes shine with blackness and horror. We shake hands.

‘Hey, Dariez!’ Paullie says from his desk. ‘We got your room ready; you want to meet your roommate?’ Chapter Twenty-One

My roommate is Joy.

She looks about like what you’d expect for a girl named Glee, yet it is not polite to ask how someone identifies: big; straight gray beard; wide, wrinkled dark face; glasses with white plastic rims.

He doesn’t have any clothes, apparently, senses he’s in a dark blue robe, which smells intensely of body odor. Not that it’s easy to notice any of this stuff at first, because when I go into the room, he’s burrowed into bed.

Paullie flicks on the light. ‘Joy! It’s almost lunch! Wake up.

You have a new roommate!’

‘Mm?’ He peers out from his sheets. ‘Who is?’ ‘I’m Dariez,’ I say, hands in my pockets.

‘Mm, It is very cold here, Dariez. You do not like it.’

‘Joy, weren’t the men in here to fix the heat?’

‘Yes, they fix yesterday, very cold. Fix today, tonight very cold.’

‘It’s spring, buddy; it doesn’t get cold.’

‘Mm.’

‘Dariez, that’s you over there.’

The bed in the far corner is made up for me if you can call it that. It’s the sparsest bed I’ve ever seen: small and pale yellow with a sheet, a top sheet, and one pillow.

No blanket, no stuffed animals, no drawers below, no patterns, no candles, no headboard. It’s just you and the girl you're with… nothing but getting to know someone… something you don’t seem to know how to do, or they don’t want to with you… right?

This reflects the style of the room, which has a window (encased blinds again,) a radiator under paneling, two beds, a table between the two beds with two funny-shaped hospital pitchers of water on top, lights, a closet, and a bathroom.

There aren’t any patterns on the wall; only the ceiling has porous tiles that could be fun to look at. I check the closet.

Joy has a tired pair of pants on the bottom shelf. The rest of the space is

mine. I take off my hoodie and stuff it in there.

‘Okay?’ Paullie asks. ‘Lunch in five minutes.’ He leaves the door open. I sit down on my bed.

‘Please close the door, please,’ Joy says. I close it, come back. He looks right through me. ‘Thank you.’ ‘What do we have for lunch?’

I ask.

‘Hm.’

I’m not sure how to respond to that. I asked him what question. ‘Ah … Is the food good?’

‘Mm.’

‘Ah… Where are you from?’

‘Italy,’ he says in a clipped voice, and it’s the first word I’ve heard him say

that he sounds happy with. ‘Where are you from?

Your family?’

‘White. German and Irish and Czech. A little Jewish, we think.

But I’m Christian, I guess.’

That reminds me: in this sparse room, is it possible that the Gideons have placed a Bible?

They put one in every motel in the world; they should have gotten to this place. I check the drawers, under the pitchers of water: nope.

Out of range of the Gideon’s. This is solemn.

‘M-mm,’ Joy says. ‘What you look for? There is nothing.’ He keeps staring.

I want to lay down, he was laying down with her she was in his arms- it was a cute crush- love…

They all knew… and was teasing the next day… to get the sleep I couldn't get last night, but something about the way my roommate is lying there makes me want to leave, to walk around.

Maybe it'll be good to be with somebody like him, someone who seems worse off than me. I never really considered it, but there are kids worse off than me, right?

I mean, some kids are homeless and can't get out of bed and are never going to be able to hold a job and, in Joy's case, have serious problems with temperature, all because- their brains are broken. Compared to them I'm… well, I'm a spoiled rich kid. Which is another

something to feel bad about? So, who's worse off?

I go out into the hall and almost bash headlong into one of the giant metal racks of trays.

The rack gives off heat and smells of fresh cooked salty food and is being wheeled along by an attendant in a skullcap.

She jumped onto my bed and was cuddled up to me tightly.

'Careful!' He yells at me, saying they're looking… yet but this is what you need and what they want- a little boy.

Oh, no…

Now I have to eat…

This will be the first time- that they'll see how bad things are with me…

I couldn’t eat that egg downstairs and can’t eat anything now.

What if I get stressed and the boy pulls his rope in my stomach, and I throw up in the dining room?

That’ll be a fine entrance.

‘Lunch!’ the little boy with the almost harelip calls down the hall. He pops out of the dining room, walks down to the far window and back, and knocks on everyone’s door, even if they’re awake and right in his face. ‘Come on, Candace! Let’s go, Bernie! C’mon, Kate! times to eat! Come on, Joy!’

‘That’s Armelio,’ a voice says behind me. I turn; it’s Joy in his Martian sweatshirt. ‘They call him the President. He runs the whole floor.’ ‘Hi, who’re Ya?’ Armelio asks as he passes.

‘Dariez.’ I shake his hand.

All right! Kids! We have a new person here! ‘Great to meet you!

Excellent, buddy! My new buddy. That’s great! times for lunch!

Solomon, come out of your room, don’t give any trouble, come and eat! Everybody’s got to eat!’

I move into the dining room with Armelin bellowing and cast myself at a seat next to the bald boy, Humble, who is still talking about psychologists and yachts.

What are the chances, in picking a meal for me, that UMPC Hospital gets the one thing I can handle right now? Between fish nuggets and veal marsala and a Technicolor quiche and other items of disgust, I see handed out on trays to

other kids (Armelio, the president, hands out all the trays, announcing kids' names as he does so: ‘Gilner, Gilner, that’s my new friend!’)

I get curry-flavored chicken breast: it doesn’t have real liquid curry, just a lovely infusion of yellow spices and a plastic knife and fork to cut it up. It also has broccoli…

Like- like… LIKE- the vegetable I-I-I like best, and herbed carrots on the side.

When I open the plastic lid…

…I just grin big, because, I know something has shifted in my stomach- not the Big Shift, but something concrete-and I am going to eat this.

(One week in)

That night she did the same thing with me sleeping with me, and we had slow sex…

But before I get ahead of myself- we need to say why-

(Back)

Anyways…

Besides the chicken and vegetables, the tray has coffee, hot water, a teabag, milk, sugar, salt, pepper, juice, yogurt, and a cookie.

It’s as good-looking a meal as I can remember.

I start to slice the chicken. ‘Does anyone have extra salt?’ Humble, across my table, stretches his neck to the room. ‘Here.’ I split him off my salt packet. ‘I would’ve hooked you up.’

‘See, you didn’t speak to me,’ Humble says, pouring the salt on his chicken, looking at me through eyes surrounded by thin and purple-hued skin, as if he got punched in both a week ago.

‘So-o like- um- yeah- naturally… I assumed you were one of those yuppies.’

‘I’m not.’ I put the chicken in my mouth.

It tastes okay and good… yet she is all I had my mind on…

‘There’s a lot of yuppies in this place, and you have that look about you, you know-the yuppie look of kids with money?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Kids who don’t care about other kids. Unlike me…, see, I genuinely care about other kids. Does that mean that

somebody won't be inclined to beat the hell out of somebody?

No, but that's my environment. I'm like an animal.'

'We're all like animals,' I say. 'Especially now, when we're all in a room eating. It reminds me of high school.'

Like in Animal Farm, which I read, all animals are created equal, but some are more equal than others?

Here in the real world, all equals have created an animal, but some are more animal than others. Hold on, let me write that down.'

Humble reaches behind him to the one window in the dining room, which has board games stacked up under it.

He pulls Scrabble off the top of the stack, fishes out a pen from the box,

removes the board, flips it over, and writes on the back of it, which is already covered with scribbling- ‘You’re smart, I see that.

We’re all animals, high school is animals, but some of us are more animal than others.

‘Humble!’ Paullie says from the door.

‘Hey, hey, okay!’ He throws his hands up. ‘I didn’t do it!’

‘How boy-y do we have to tell you, no writing on the Scrabble board!

Do you need a pencil and paper?’ ‘Whatever…’ he says. ‘It’s all in here.’ He points to his head, then turns back to me as if absolutely nothing had interrupted our conversation. ‘Me and you, we might be equals, but I’m more animal.’

‘Uh-huh.’ I picked the right place to sit.

‘I need to be the alpha male in any given situation.

That’s why as soon as I noticed you, I made a few judgments.

I saw that you were very young. Now in the wild, the lion who sees new youngsters from another pride, another breed, like he will kill and eat those youngsters, so he can breed his offspring. But here’-he gestures around as if you need to elucidate what ‘here’ is, as if you don’t just take it for granted once you’re inside’ there, unfortunately, appears to be a distinct lack of women accepting of my breeding potential. So, in your youth, you are not a threat to me.’

‘I see.’ Across the room, he is trying to open his juice with one hand. The other hand stays at his side; I can’t tell if he can’t move it or just doesn’t want to. Paullie comes over and helps him.

‘It’ll come to Ya!’ He says.

‘Do you feel that I’m a threat to you?’ Humble asks.

‘No, you seem like a pretty cool boy.’ I munch.

Humble nods. His food, which was sitting on the plate in front of him, very innocent and oblivious, gets upset over the next twenty seconds as he eats half of it. I continue my slow and steady pace.

‘When I was your age-you’re fifteen, right?’

I nod, ‘How’d you know?’

‘I’m good with ages. When I was fifteen, I had this chick who was twenty-eight. I don’t know why, but she loved me. Now, I was doing a lot of pot back then, my whole life was pot…’

It’s weird how your stomach can come back around. As I tune Humble out, I eat not because I want to, not because I have to overcome anything, not to prove myself to anyone, but because it’s there. I eat because that’s what kids do. And somehow when the food is put in front of you by an institution, when there’s a large gray force behind it and you don’t have to thank anyone for it, you have the animal instinct to make it disappear before a rival like Humble comes along and snatches it away. I think as I chew, my problem might be too much thinking.

That’s why you need to join the Army, soldier. I thought I was already in the Army, sir!

You’re in the mental army, Gilner, not the U.S. Army. So, I should join?

I don’t know: can you handle it?

I don’t know.

Well, you seem to know that you like order and discipline.

That’s what the Army offers young men like you, Gilner, and that’s what you’re getting here. But I don’t want to be in the Army; I want to be normal.

You’ve got some considering to do, then, soldier, because normal isn't no job as far as I’m concerned.

‘Do you have a girlfriend?’ Humble asks.

‘What?’

‘Do you? Somewhere out there. You got a hot little fifteen-year-old?’ He points his food-colored fork at me.

‘No!’ I smile, thinking of Emmah.

‘They got cute ones, though.’ Humble runs his hand through hair that is no longer there. He has hairy dark arms with tattoos of jokers, swords, bulldogs, and pirate ships. ‘They just keep making the girls cuter and cuter.’ ‘It’s all the hormones,’ I say.

‘That’s right. You’re very smart. You got any sugar?’

I hand over a sugar packet. I’ve finished my chicken and I could eat more, frankly, but I don’t know who to ask. Might as well make the tea. I open the teabag, which is labeled ‘Sweet Ouch-

Nee,' a brand I have never heard of and am not convinced exists, and stain my water with a bunch of deep dips. As I'm finishing up, Paullie approaches with the second tray of food, identical to the first.

'You look like you could handle some seconds,' he says.

'Thanks.'

'Eat up.'

I tackle the second chicken. I am a working machine. Part of me works that didn't before.

'The girls, they drink all this milk with cow hormones,' I say between bites, 'and they develop a lot younger.' 'You're telling me!' Humble says. 'The crazy thing is how the girls in my day were a lot better than my father's girls. I wonder what the next generation will be like.'

‘Sex robots.’

‘Heh. Where you from?’

‘Around here.’

‘This neighborhood? Nice. Must’ve been a quick ride.

If you came by ambulance. And I’m not assuming and I’m not judging. I’m just being curious.’ He eats two gigantic bites of his food, chews, and continues, ‘How did you get here?’

He’s broken the rule of Six North. But maybe it’s not a rule.

Or maybe eating with someone breaks it.

‘I checked myself in.’

‘You did? Why?’

‘I was feeling pretty bad; I wanted to kill myself.’

‘Buddy, that’s what I told my doctor the other week. I told him, ‘Doc, I’m not afraid of dying; I’m only afraid of living, and I want to put this bayonet through my stomach,’ and then I stopped taking my blood pressure medication. Because I have high blood pressure on top of everything else, on top of the drugs they have me on here that keep me whacked out of my mind; if I don’t eat lots of salt to regulate my blood pressure I’ll die, so when I told him I wasn’t taking my medication he said ‘What, are you crazy? Are you trying to kill yourself?!

And I looked him right in the eyes and said, ‘Yes.’ And they carted me off here.’

‘Huh.’

‘The problem is I’ve been living in my car for the last year. I have nothing; I have the clothes on my back and that’s it. The only thing I have is the car and now the car has been towed and all my stuff is inside. There’s thirty-five hundred dollars’ worth of film equipment in there.’

‘Wow.’

‘So-o, over the next few days I have to call the police station, the tow yard, get myself into an adult home, and talk to my daughter. She’s about your age. The mother I’m completely over but the daughter I love to death. The mother I’d like to love to death.’

‘Heh.’

‘Don’t do me any favors; only laugh if it’s funny.’

‘It is!’

‘Good. Because right now I don’t have you pegged as a yuppie. You’re something else. I’m not sure what you are, but I’m going to find out.’

‘Cool.’

‘I’m going to go get my medication so I can sit through this afternoon with my head completely whacked.’

Humble slides away…

I finish eating the chicken.

When it’s done-clean plate-I feel better than I have about anything I’ve done in maybe a year.

This is all I need to do. Keith was hesitant at the Anxiety Management Center, but he was right-all you need is food, water, and shelter. And here I have all three. What next?

I look across the dining room, and three of the younger kids the big girl, the girl with dark hair and blue streak, and the blond girl with cuts-are all sitting together.

‘C’mere.’ Blue Streak beckons.

It’s been a while since a bunch of girls asked me over to their table. First times.

‘Me?’ I point at myself.

‘No, the other new boy,’ Blue Streak says.

I’m not sure what to do with my tray. I get up, then turn back, then turn toward the girls, then swivel-

‘On the cart,’ Blue Streak says. She turns to the big girl. ‘God, he’s so cute.’

Did she just say that? I put my tray on the cart and sit in the vacant seat with the girls.

‘What’s your name?’ Blue Streak asks.

‘Ah, Dariez.’

‘So-o, what’s it like to be the hottest boy in here, Dariez?’ My body hitches and jerks up as if on a pulley system. She’s got it all wrong- she’s the hot one. It’s tough to tell whether her skin or teeth are the perfect white. Her eyes are dark and her lips pouty and open; the blue streak accents the contrast of hair and face, and she smiles at me- that’s smiling. I don’t know how I didn’t notice her hotness before when I looked into the dining room. ‘Jennifer,’ the big girl says. She leans toward me. ‘I’m Becca. Don’t take advantage of Jennifer; she’s a sex

addict.’ Jennifer smacks her lips: ‘Shut up!’ She turns back.

‘I’m only here for one more day.’ She slithers forward. ‘You want to spend it with me?’

I think about what Humble would say. He would say Yeah, absolutely, because he’s the alpha male. I try to develop and drop my words, keeping my voice deep and level: ‘Yeah, absolutely.’

‘Good,’ she says, and there’s a heat on my knee and a hand moving up my leg. She leans in. ‘I think you’re really hot.’ The hand encloses my thigh. ‘I have my private room because I’m so messed up, they won’t let me sleep with anybody else.’

‘You have your private room because you’re a slut!’ Becca corrects, and Jennifer kicks her.

‘Ow-ah!’

Without warning, the blond girl with the cuts on her face gets up and speed-walks out of the room. I look through the window for her: nothing.

Jennifer says. ‘She’s no good for you.’

Then, sparking an out-of-body experience that truly makes me question whether I’m dreaming this, or have died and gone to some kind of awesome hell, she flicks her tongue around her lips in a perfect O-oo.

‘Forget her, you have me now’

Something flashes out in the hall. The blond girl streaks to the window.

I can’t be sure it’s her. I mean, it is a her-it has breasts.

And- and- and- I think, yes, I think- I-I- I recognize her small body and wife-beater.

But- But I can’t see her face because she presses up to a piece of paper against the glass:

BEWARE OF PENIS-

The sign slides down as if on an elevator. ‘What are you looking at?’ Jennifer asks, turning back. I eye her body as she swivels; from the waist up, she doesn’t look like she has a penis. I keep my peripheral vision on the hall in case the messenger returns. ‘Ha!’ Becca is like. ‘Joy did it to you again.’ ‘She what?’ Jennifer stands. She has a round

and female shape. Her legs are encased in jeans that have frills around her butt.

'I can't believe her … hey.' She turns back. 'You are looking at my pants?'

'Yeah,' I gulped. I've lost all alpha maleness. Could I be like a theta male? They have to get lucky some Joy.

Being on top of the sexual food chain is a lot of pressure.

'I made them myself,' she says. 'I'm a fashion designer.'

'Wow? That's like a real job.' My mind spins; it's somehow fallen off the sex track into grade-school logic. 'I thought you were my age; how'd you learn how to design clothes-'

'All right,' Paullie strides in. 'Playtime is over. C'mon, Charles.'

‘What the hell!’ Jennifer jumps a few inches in the air and stomps her feet. Then, the horror of horrors, her voice drops two octaves. ‘You boys won’t let me have any fun!’ It’s a bad voice, even for a boy, like a frog croaking. Becca laughs and laughs, doubling over on herself, and all I can do is catch my breath and stare goggle-ly-eyed at Jennifer for signs. It can’t be. She’s flat, that’s all. She has big hands; lots of girls have big hands. She doesn’t have Adam’s apple-oh, wait, she’s wearing a turtleneck.

‘C’mon, don’t bother Dariez,’ Paullie says.

‘But he’s so cute!’

‘He’s not cute, he’s a hospital patient like you. You’re supposed to get out tomorrow; don’t jeopardize it. Have you taken your medicine yet?’

‘Hormone treatments.’ Beth / Charles winks at me.

‘Come-mon, enough.’

Becca laughs, sighs. ‘Oh, she got you good. I’m getting my meds.’

I look down at the table as they leave. I need some meds. I glance up and see patients lined up at the desk next to the phone, the nurses’ station, eagerly passing the joys of time in their little ways- President Armelio bopping from foot to foot, Joy- holding the hand that refuses to work-before getting pills in little plastic cups. Beth Charles and Becca eventually appear at the end of the line, chatting and gesticulating, and Beth / Charles blows me a kiss. I don’t think I need to be in line behind them right now. Besides, all I take is Zoloft in the

morning; if they wanted me on something midday, they would have told me.

When Becca and J / C are gone and I'm still sitting shell-shocked at the table, another sign appears at the window, this one inching up from below as if hoisted by spider threads:

DON'T WORRY. HE / SHE / IT GETS EVERYBODY, WELCOME TO SIX NORTH!

When I go out to find her, she isn't there. I ask the nurse wrapping up her dispensing duties if I need any meds, and she says I'm not scheduled for any. I ask her if I can have some. She asks what I need them for. I tell her, to deal with this crazy place. She says if they had pills for that, they wouldn't need places like this in the first place, would they?

‘So, what’s it like?’ Mom asks, holding a tote bag of toiletries, with Dad and Sarah next to her. We’re at the end of the right H leg, me in one chair facing the three of them. Visiting hours are from 12 to 8 on Saturday.

Sarah doesn’t let me answer.

‘It’s like One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest!’ she says, excited. She’s dressed up in jeans and a fake suede jacket for Six North. ‘I mean, all these kids look like… serious crazies!’

‘Sh-h,’ I tell her. ‘Joy’s right there.’ Joy is behind her at the window, sitting with his arms crossed as usual, out of his shirt and into a clean navy robe.

‘Who’s Joy?’ Mom asks eagerly.

‘The boy I came in with downstairs. I think he’s schizophrenic.’

‘Doesn’t that mean he has two personalities?’ Sarah asks, turning. ‘Like, he’s not just playing; she’s also Molly or something.’

‘No, you’d be surprised, that’s a different one,’ I raise my eyebrows. ‘Joy’s just a little… scattered.’ Joy sees me looking at him and smiles. ‘I tell you, you play those numbers, it’ll come to yah!’ he chirps.

‘I think he’s talking about Lotto numbers,’ I explain. ‘I’ve been trying to figure it out.’

‘Oh my gosh.’ My sister covers her face.

‘No, Sarah, don’t do that, watch,’ Mom says. She turns around. ‘Thank you very much, Joy.’

‘I tell you: it the truth!’

‘I like this place,’ Mom turns back. ‘I think it’s full of good kids.’

‘I like it.’ Dad leans in. ‘When can I join?’ But when no one laughs, he leans back, clasps his hands, sighs.

‘Is that a transvestite?’ Sarah asks. J / C is down the hall, like forty feet away, and I don’t know for the life of me how Sarah suspects something out there that I couldn’t see at the point-blank range.

‘No, now listen-’

‘Is it?’ Dad squints.

‘Boys!’

Look here, this wall here tells about the story of a girl Named- Haven, look!

‘Transvestite!’ Joy shrieks. He does it at top range-I haven’t heard him that loud before. The entire hall, which admittedly is just me, my family, J / C, and the older professor-type girl with the glasses, stops and stare’s.

‘I tell you once, it’ll come: it comes to Ya!’

J / C starts walking toward us. ‘Are we talking about me?’ he asks in his boy's voice.

He waves at me.

‘Hey, Joy.’ He comes right up between me and my sister.

‘Dariez, your name is, right?’ ‘Yeah,’ I mumble.

‘Wow, is this your family?’

‘Yeah.’ I tip my palm at each of them-it’s at the level of the frills on his pants. ‘My dad’-he juts’ his lip out-’ my mom’ -she nods, all smiles-’ and my sister, Sarah’-she reaches out a hand.

‘Oh my God, so lovely!’ J / C says. ‘I’m Charles.’ He shakes with everyone. ‘They’re going to take really good care of your son here. He’s a good boy.’

‘How about you; what are you in for?’ Dad asks. I kick him.

Doesn’t he know what not to ask?

He addresses Dad: ‘I have bipolar, sir, and I had an episode, and they brought me here. I’m going back upstate today.

But the doctors are very attentive here, and the turnaround times are great.’ ‘Wonderful,’ Mom says.

‘It’s okay, Dariez!’ J / C touches my shoulder. ‘My gosh, did you just kick your dad? I never even did that.’

I look at them: my safe environment. I frankly wouldn’t be surprised to find any of them in Six North. ‘Well, I’ll leave you, boys, to your afternoon,’ J / C says. He walks away- ‘Of course’-J / C gestures to us-’ it’s a lot better when you have family support. They want to make sure they discharge you into a safe environment. I don’t have that.’ He shakes his head. ‘Dariez, you’re very lucky.’ slowly.

Joy makes an indecipherable high-pitched whining noise.

‘That’s applause, isn’t it?’ Dad asks, throwing a thumb behind him. ‘I like that.’

‘Those are awesome pants,’ Sarah says.

‘Okay, so let’s get down to business, Dariez,’ Mom is like.

‘What do you need?’

‘I need a phone card. I need you, boys, to take my phone and leave it plugged in so the calls register. I need some clothes, like what you were brought before, Mom. I don’t need towels; they have those. Magazines would be good. And a pencil and paper, that would rock.’ ‘Simple enough. What kind of magazines?’

‘Science magazines! He loves those,’ Dad says.

‘He might not be up for science magazines right now,’ Mom answers. ‘Do you want anything lighter?’ ‘Do you want Star?’ Sarah asks.

‘Sarah, why would I want Star?’

‘Because it’s awesome.’ She reaches into her purse- her first one, black, a recent Mom purchase-and unrolls a glossy pink monstrosity, complete with pictures of the most recent spectacular outing of a celebrity breast in public.

I hold it up for Joy.

‘Mm-hmm! ‘He says. ‘I tell you! I tell you! It comes to Ya!’

‘That’s very nice,’ says the professor girl with bugged-out eyes, who I somehow didn’t realize had migrated right behind me.

‘Oh, excuse me,’ she looks up. ‘I wasn’t listening to your conversation at all.’ She walks to her room.

‘Um… ‘Sarah says.

‘I’ll take it,’ I say. I put it under my seat. ‘I think the floor will enjoy it.’

‘Is it just me, or are you starting to develop a sort of allegiance to the tribe?’ Dad asks.

‘Sh-h.’ I smile.

‘Dariez, the next order of business: have you called Dr.

Jarnerny?’

‘No.’

‘Have you called Dr. Ross?’

‘No.’

‘Well, they both need to know where you are, for health insurance reasons and because they’re your doctors and they care about you and this is going to be very important to them.’

‘Their numbers are in my phone.’

‘Well, let’s call them; we picked up your phone from the front,’ Mom reaches into her bag-

‘No!’ Dad grabs her hands. ‘Don’t take out the phone!’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, honey. Dariez’s the one who’s not allowed to have it, not us.’

‘Well, uh, I don’t think we want to be getting our son in trouble. This isn’t the kind of place you want to be getting sent to a time-out.’

I look at him. ‘That’s not that funny.’

‘What? Oh, sorry,’ he says.

‘No, Dad, seriously. It’s not… I mean, this is serious business.’

‘I’m just trying to lighten the mood, Dariez-’

‘Well, that’s what you’re always trying to do. Let’s just, not do it here.’

Dad nods, looks me dead in the eyes; slowly and regretfully, he banishes all the smiling and joking from his face, and for once he’s just my dad, watching his son who has fallen so low. ‘All right, then.’ We stay quiet.

‘Is that the truth, Joy?’ I ask without looking at him.

‘It’s the truth, and it comes to yah!’ I smile.

‘We’ll handle the phone later,’ Dad sums up.

‘Next order of business?’ Mom asks.

‘How long I’m going to be in here, I think.’

‘How long do you think?’

‘A couple of days. But I haven’t seen the doctor yet. Dr. Mahmoud.’

‘Right, how is he? Is he good?’

‘I don’t know, Mom. You met him for as long as I did. He makes rounds soon, and I’ll get to talk with him.’

‘I think you need to stay here until you’re better, Dariez. You don’t want to come out early and have to come back; that’s how you get ‘in the system.’’

‘Right. I won’t. I think that’s a big part of places like this: they make them, so you don’t want to come back.

‘How’s the food?’ Sarah asks.

‘Oh, I almost forgot,’ I look at my family. ‘I’m … I know I shouldn’t be proud of this; it’s like really sad that this is my big accomplishment of the day… but I ate everything at lunch.’

‘You did?’ Mom stands up, pulls me up, and hugs me.

‘Yeah.’ I pull away. ‘It was a chicken. I ate two helpings of it.’

‘Girl, that is a big one,’ Dad gets up and shakes my hand.

‘No, it’s not, it’s really simple, everybody does it, but for me, it’s like a stupid triumph-’

‘No,’ Mom says, looking me in the eyes. ‘What’s a triumph is that you woke up this morning and decided to live. That’s a triumph. That’s what you did

today.’ I nod at her. Like I say, I’m not a crier.

‘Yeah, cause if you had died …’ Sarah is like, ‘that would have sucked.’ She rolls her eyes and hugs my leg.

I sit back down. ‘Once the food is in front of you it’s just like, eat. I mean, they’re professionals here; they know how to take kids and put them in a routine that gives them something to do.’

‘That’s right,’ Mom says. ‘So, what are you going to do now?’

‘I think there are activities-’

‘Hey, Dariez, is this your family?’ President Armelio steps on the scene. His half-harelip and hair shock my sister, but his relentless enthusiasm for just-I don’t know-living-would knock the fear out of anybody.

He shakes all the hands and says we're a beautiful family and I'm a good boy, he can tell.

'Dariez's my buddy! Hey, buddy- you want to play cards?'

President Armelio holds up a deck of playing cards like he just fished it out of the sea.

'Yeah, absolutely!' I say. I stand up. When were the last times I played cards? Before the test, probably-before high school.

'All right!' Armelio says. 'My kind of boy! Let's do it. I've been looking and looking: nobody here likes to play cards as I do! What do you want to play? Spades? I'll crush you, buddy; I'll crush you.'

I look at my parents. ‘We’ll call you,’ Mom says. ‘And hey what about sleeping?’

‘I’m wired right now,’ I say. ‘But I’ll crash. I’m starting to get a headache.’

‘Headache? Buddy, once I crush you in spades, you’re going to have a lot bigger headache!’ Armelio toddles away to the dining room to set up the cards.

‘See yah,’ Sarah says, hugging me.

‘Bye, my sweet girl.’ Dad shakes my hand.

‘I love you,’ Mom says. ‘I’ll call you with the doctors’ phone numbers.’

‘And bring a phone card.’

‘And I’ll bring a phone card. You hang in there, Dariez.’ ‘Yeah, I will.’ And

as soon as they're around the bend, I head into the dining room and learn how to play spades for the rest of the afternoon, which Armelio does crush me in.

Part: 11

I'm afraid of making phone calls. The phone on Six North is a hubbub of activity, with Joy and the blond burned-out-type, who I learn is named Joy, fielding calls from, I assume, their respective female counterparts. Joy starts off her calls happily and says…

When she answers, she always says 'Jack's Pub,' and then finds whoever the call's for. 'Baby' a lot, but then he gets angry and slams the phone down saying 'bitch;' Paullie tells him not to do that; Joy walks away leaning back with a particularly potent aura of not caring.

Five minutes later, another call comes in for him, and he’s back to ‘Baby.’ He doesn’t even answer the phone, though; President Armelio has that job.

Kids on the outside world don’t know what’s happened to me I'm in a sort of stasis right now. Things are under control. But the dam will break. Even if I’m here just through Monday, the rumors will start flying, and the homework will pile up.

In a rare moment when Joy and that girl I call Nevaeh, over I don’t remember her name, leave the phone open, I walk up to it with the phone card that Mom brought me twenty minutes after she left with

Dad and Sarah. I pick up and hear the dial tone, dial the 800 number

for the phone card... and then stop. I can't do it.

I just don't want to deal with it.

'Where's Dariez?'

'She's sick.'

'She is not sick, she got alcohol poisoning because he can't handle real liquor.'

'I heard she took someone's pills and freaked out.'

'I heard she realized she's gay and he's coming to grips with it.'

'I heard her parents are sending her to a different school.'

'She couldn't handle it here, anyway.'

'She was always such a loser.'

‘She is freaking out in front of her computer.’

‘She can’t move or anything. She’s catatonic.’

‘She woke up and thinks she’s a horse, one day- she crazy.’

(It was said out of the side of her mouth.)

Well, whatever, what’s question three?

There were two messages on my phone when I came in, and now there are probably more, each one necessitating a callback, and the call back possibly necessitating another callback Tentacles- leading me right back to where I was last night. I can’t go there, so I wait. I can wait for five minutes.

But then Joy's on the line. And then I wait another five minutes. And the messages are piling up. And this isn't even counting email. What sort of hellish assignments have my teachers e-mailed out?

'Excuse me, are you using the phone?' the giant black girl with the cane asks as I stare at it.

'Yeah, uh.' I pick up the receiver in my hands. 'Yes. Yes, I am.' 'Okay.' She smiles, rolling her gums, not showing teeth. I start dialing, enter my PIN, enter my number.

'Please enter your password, then press the pound sign.'

I obey.

'You have-three-new messages. 'One more than before. Not so bad.

‘First new message: message marked urgent.’ Uh-oh.

‘Hey, Dariez, it’s Emmah, I just, um … we talked, and you were sounding really bad. I just wanted to make sure you were doing all right, and since you’re not answering-it’s like two A.M., I mean, why would you be answering? -But I’m kind of worried that maybe you went and did something stupid because of me. Don’t. I mean, it’s sweet, but don’t. Okay, that’s it, I’m with Kristopher, he’s being a total dick. Bye.’

‘To erase this message-’

I hit 7.

‘Next message.’

‘Dariez, it’s Kristopher, call me back? Let’s chill-’ I hit 7-7.

‘Next message.’ ‘Hello, Mr. Gilner, this is your science teacher, Mr. Reynolds. I got your phone number from the student directory. We need to talk about the lack of your labs; I’m missing five of them-’ 7-7.

‘End of messages.’

I put the phone down like it’s a dangerous animal. I pick back up, call home. Can’t stop now.

‘Sarah, can you get the phone numbers of Emmah and Kristopher out of my cell? And look through the recent missed calls for something from Knox; I have to call my science teacher.’ ‘Sure. How are things over there?’

I look to my left. A Hasidic Jewish boy, complete with the white pants, yarmulke, tassels hanging off him,

braided hair, and sandals, dashes down the hall toward me. Scraps of red food dot his dark beard, and his eyes are wild and unhinged. He says to me: ‘I’m Solomon.’

‘Um, I’ve heard from you. I’m Dariez, but I’m on the phone.’ I cup the receiver.

‘I would ask you to please keep it down! I’m trying to rest!’ He turns and races away, holding his pants.

‘O-ooh! Solomon introduced himself to you!’ hoots the girl with the cane. ‘That’s big.’ ‘It’s normal,’ I tell my sister.

‘Okay, here.’ She gives me Emmah’s and Kristopher’s and the teacher’s numbers; I write them down on a scrap of paper that Paullie has given me. I should’ve known these before.

Emmah's looks good written down-wholesome and useful. The science teachers look jagged and hateful. I may not be able to call him until tomorrow.

'Thanks, Sarah-bye.'

I hang up and look toward the lady with the cane.

'Hey, I'm Dariez,' I say.

'Ebony.' She nods. We shake hands.

'Ebony, it's cool if I just make one more call?'

'Of course.'

I dial the 800 number, enter my PIN, dial Emmah.

'Hello?'

'Hey, Emmah, it's me.'

‘Dariez, where are you?’

It’s funny how kids ask that as soon as they get you on the phone. I think it’s a byproduct of cell phones: kids-girls and moms especially- want to nail you down in physical space. The fact is that you could be anywhere on a cell phone and it shouldn’t be important where you are. But it becomes the first thing kids ask.

‘I’m at a friend’s house. In Knox.’

I wonder, too, how ~Sped~ lies cell phones have contributed to the world.

‘Uh-huh, Dariez. I don’t think so.’

‘What do you mean?’ I wipe the sweat off my brow. The sweat is starting again. This isn’t good. I was sweating down in the ER, but I wasn’t sweating at lunch.

‘You’re not at any friend’s house. You’re probably at some girl’s house.’

I look at Ebony. She smiles and leans forward on her cane.

‘Yeah, totally.’

‘I know you. Last night you had me on the phone; tonight, you’re out hooking up with some girl.’

‘Sure, Emmah-’

‘Seriously, how are you? Thanks for calling back. I was worried.’

‘I know, I got your message.’

‘I don’t want you to freak out over me. I think you just need some time to decompress a little bit, and not think about me and think about someone else. Because like, I know we might be good

for each other, but I'm with someone else, you know?'

'Right… um… I wasn't freaking out about you last night, actually.'

'No?'

'No, I was freaking out about, like, much bigger things. I was having kind of a crisis, and I wanted to reach out to somebody who understood.'

'But you asked me if we would ever have been able to be together.'

'Well, I was trying to clear that up because yah' know … I wanted to do something stupid.'

She drops her voice: 'Kill yourself?'

'Yeah.'

‘You wanted to kill yourself over me?’

‘No!’ I scowl. ‘I was just in a really bad place, and you were part of it because you’re a part of my life, just like Kristopher is a part of it and my family is a part of it, but I thought you could clear something up for me before I…’

‘Dariez, I’m so flattered.’

‘No, you have the wrong idea. Don’t be flattered.’

‘How could I not be? I never had a boy want to kill himself for me before. It’s like the most robotic thing.’

‘Emmah, it wasn’t about you.’

‘Are you sure?’

I look down, and the answer is right there in my chest and it’s

rebounding. ‘Yes. I have bigger problems than you.’ ‘Ah, okay.’

‘And you shouldn’t assume that everything is always about you.’

‘Whatever. What’s wrong with you?’

‘Nothing. Everything’s a lot better now, actually.’

‘You’re acting like a total dick. Do you want to come out tonight?’

‘I can’t.’

‘Did Kristopher call you? We’re having a big party at his house.’

‘Right. I’m probably not going to be partying for… like … a while. Like ever, maybe.’

‘Is everything okay now?’

‘Yeah, I’m just… I’m figuring some things out.’

‘At your friend’s house.’

‘Correct.’

‘Are you like- in a crack den or something?’

‘No!’ I yell, and just then- President Armelio walks up to me:

‘Hey, buddy, you want to play spades? I’ll crush you.’

‘Not now, Armelio.’

‘Who’s that?’ Emmah asks.

‘Leave him alone, he’s talking with his girlfriend.’ Ebony taps Armelio with her cane.

‘She’s not my girlfriend,’ I whisper to her.

‘Who’s that?’

‘My friend Armelio.’

‘No, the girl.’

‘My friend Ebony.’

‘Where are you, Dariez?’

‘I got to go.’

‘All right…’ Emmah trails her voice off. ‘I’m glad you’re doing… uh… better.’ ‘I’m doing a lot better,’ I say.

She’s done, I think. She’s done, and you’re done with her.

‘See Ya, Dariez.’ I hang up.

‘I think that’s over,’ I say to myself.

Then I decide to announce it to the hall: ‘I think that that’s over!’ Ebony stomps her cane, and Armelio claps.

Something deep in my guts, below my heart, has made a shift to the left and settled in a more comfortable place. It's not the Shift, but it's a shift. I picture Emmah with her gorgeous face and little body and black hair and pouty lips and Kristopher's hands all over her but also with her pot-smoking and the pimples on her forehead and making fun of kids all the Joy and the way she's always so proud of how she's dressed. And I picture her fading.

I play cards with Armelio in the dining room until Joy pokes his head in like always:

'Dariez? It says on your door Dr. Mahmoud is your doctor? He's making his rounds.'

Continued: 1

Joy-

'I don't want to be here,' I tell him at the entrance to my room, where I catch him before he visits Joy.

'I don't think it's the place for me.'

'Of course not.' Dr. Mahmoud nods. He has on the same suit he had on earlier in the day, although that feels like last year. 'If you liked it here, that would be a very bad prognosis!'

'Right.' I chuckle. 'Well, I mean, everybody's friendly, but I feel a lot better, and I think I'm ready to go. Maybe on Monday? I don't want to miss school.'

Also, doc, right now the phone messages and e-mails are bunching up and the rumors are flying. I just talked to this girl and I did, okay-but the Tentacles

are coiled and the pressure is rising, getting ready to pounce on me when I leave. If I'm in here too long, I'll have that much more to do when I get out.

'We can't rush it,' Dr. Mahmoud says. 'The important thing is that you get better. If you try to leave too soon- suddenly, everything is better? …We doctors get suspicious.'

'Oh. Well, you don't want the doctor who can sign you out of the psychiatric hospital getting suspicious.' 'Right. Right now, to me, you look much better, but maybe this is a false recovery-'

'A Fake Shift.'

'I'm sorry?'

'A Fake Shift. That's what I call it. When you think you've beaten it, but you

haven't?' 'Exactly… we don't want one of those.'

'So, I'm going to be here until I have the real Shift?'

'I don't follow.'

'I'm going to be here until I'm cured?'

'Life is not cured, Mr. Gilner.' Dr. Mahmoud leans in. 'Life is voyaged.'

'Okay.'

I'm not as impressed by this as he would like. He arches back: 'We don't keep you here until you are cured of anything; we keep you here until you are stable-we call it 'establishing the baseline.'' 'Okay, so when will my baseline be established?'

'Five days, probably.'

One, two, three … ‘Thursday? I can’t wait until Thursday, Doctor. I have too much school. That’s four days of school. If I miss four days I will be so behind.

Plus, my friends… ‘

‘Yes?’

‘My friends will know where I am!’

‘Aha. Is this a problem?’

‘Yes!’

‘Why?’

‘Because I’m here!’ I gestured out at the hall. Solomon shuffles by very quickly in his sandals and tells someone to be quiet, he’s trying to rest. ‘Mr. Gilner.’ Dr. Mahmoud puts a hand on my shoulder. ‘You have a chemical

imbalance, that is all. If you were a diabetic, would you be ashamed of where you were?'

'No, but-'

'If you had to take insulin and you stopped, and you were taken to the hospital, wouldn't that make sense?'

'This is different.'

'How?'

I sigh. 'I don't know how much of it is chemical. Sometimes I just think depression's one way of coping with the world. Like, some kids get drunk, some kids do drugs, some kids get depressed. Because there's so much stuff out there that you have to do something to deal with it.'

'Ah. This is why you need to be in here longer, to talk about these things,'

Dr. Mahmoud says. ‘You have a psychologist, correct?

Have you called your psychologist?’

Shoot. I knew I was forgetting something.

‘You need to call; your psychologist will come here to meet with you. What is her name? Or his?’

‘Dr. Ross.’

‘Oh!’ Dr. Mahmoud says; his lips curl into a faraway smile. ‘Wonderful. Get Andrea down here.’ ‘Andrea?’ I never knew her first name. She keeps it a big secret. It’s blacked out on all her degrees. She says it’s part of the policy.

He waves his hand. ‘Make an appointment with her; then we’ll be that much closer to coming up with your

treatment plan and getting you out of here as soon as possible. We will try for Thursday.'

'Not before- Thursday.'

'No.'

'Thursday,' I mumble to myself, looking across the room at

Joy's prone lump. 'Five days, that's it! Everything will be fine, Mr. Gilner. Your life will wait. You just participate in the group activities and call Dr. Ross. And when you grow up to be rich and successful, you don't forget me, okay?'

'Okay.'

'Can please you close the door?' Joy asks from his bed.

‘Joy, you are the next: how come you are always sleeping- sleeping- sleeping?’

Dr. Mahmoud walks past me. I call Mom to report the news, and then I call Dr. Ross. She says she’s sorry I took this turn for the worse, but it’s always two steps- forward, one-step-back.

‘If this is my one step back,’ I tell her, ‘what am I going to do next: win the lottery and get my TV show?’

That’d be a good TV show I think. A boy winning the lottery in the psych hospital.

Dr. Ross can’t come in tomorrow, because it’s Sunday, but she says she’ll be in on Monday. I’m momentarily surprised by the distinction. In Six North, there probably won’t be much different.

‘They say there’s going to be a pizza party tonight,’ Humble tells me at dinner. Dinner is chicken tenders with potatoes and salad and a pear. I eat it all. ‘But they say that every night.’ ‘What’s a pizza party?’

‘We all chip in the money and get pizza from the neighborhood. It’s tough because no one ever has any cash. It’s like a big deal if we get pepperoni.’

‘I have eight dollars.’

‘Sh-h. Don’t go announcing it!’ He stops chewing. ‘Kids in here don’t have any money. I don’t have two cents to rub together.’ I nod. ‘I never heard that one before.’

‘No? You like it?’

‘Yeah.’

‘What about: I don’t have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of.’

‘Nope.’

‘What about: I got Jack and shit and Jack left town.’ ‘Heh. No!

Where do you get them all?’

‘From the old neighborhood. Gim-me a ringy-ding.

Catch Ya on the flipside. It’s the best way to talk.’

‘A ringy-ding, what’s that-a call?’

‘Don’t ask yuppie questions.’

Humble scans the room for kids to talk about. He enjoys talking about other kids-he just enjoys talking, I’ve discovered, but he especially enjoys talking about other kids and when he does so, he puts on a peculiar sort of

voice that's not quite a whisper but is pitched at such a low monotone that no one notices it. He also seems able to throw it, so it feels like he's speaking into my left ear.

'So-o, I suppose you've become familiar with our lovely clientele here on the floor. President Armelio is the president.' He nods over at Armelio, who has finished his food first and is getting up to return the tray. 'You see how fast he eats? If you could harness a quarter of his energy, you could power the island of Knox. I'm not joking. He should work in a place with kids like us. He has such a good heart and he's never down.'

'So why is he in here?'

'He's psychotic, of course. You should-a have seen him when they

brought him in. He was screaming his head off about his mom. He’s Greek.’

‘Huh.’

‘Now there’s Ebony, She of the Ass. That is the biggest ass I’ve ever seen. I’m not even into asses, but if you were- man, you could lose yourself in there.

It’s like its own municipality. I think that’s why she needs the cane. She’s also the only girl I’ve ever known who wears velvet pants; I think you have to have a butt like that to wear velvet pants.

They only make them in extra- extra- extra- large.’

‘I didn’t even notice them.’

‘Well, give it a while. After a few days, you start to notice kids' clothes,

seeing as how they all wear the same stuff every day.'

'Things don't get dirty?'

'They do laundry on Tuesdays and Fridays. Who gave you your tour when you came in?'

'Joy!'

'He should've told you that.' Humble swivels his head then turns back. 'Now Joy and that girl too'-they're at a table together, as they were at lunch-' those two were some of the biggest methamphetamine addicts in Clarion, period, in the nineties. They were called Fiend One and Fiend Two. The party didn't start until they showed up.'

That must've been such a feeling, even though all the drugs, I think. To come into a house and have kids well up

and greet you: ‘All right, boy!’ ‘You’re here!’ ‘What’s up?’ That was probably as addictive as the amphetamines. Kids sort of does that to Kristopher.

‘What happened to them?’ I ask.

‘What happens to anybody? They got burned out, lost all their money, ended up here. Got no families, got no women-well,

I think Joy has one.’

‘He talks on the phone with her.’

‘You can’t tell from that. Kids pretend to be on the phone all the time. Like her’-he pitches his head at the bug-eyed girl who was standing behind me when I was talking with my family- ‘The Professor. I’ve caught her on the phone talking to Dr. Dial Tone. She’s a university professor. She ended up here

because she thinks someone tried to spray her apartment with insecticide. She has newspaper clippings about it and everything.'

Humble turns: 'The black kid with the glasses: he looks pretty normal, but he has it bad. You notice he doesn't come out of his room a lot. That's because he's scared that gravity is going to reverse and he's going to fall up into the ceiling. When he goes outside, he has to be near trees so, in case the gravity stops, he'll have something to hold on to. I think he's about seventeen. Have you talked to him?'

'No.'

'He doesn't talk. I don't know how much they can do for him.'

The boy looks up at the ceiling fan above the dining room, shudders, and

forks food into his mouth. ‘Then there’s my Joy.

My-a Joy’s been here a lot. I’ve been here twenty-four days, and I’ve seen him come and go twice. You seem to like him.’

‘We came in together.’

‘He’s a cool boy. And he has good teeth.’

‘Yeah, I noticed that.’

‘Pearly whites. Not a lot of kids in here have that. I wonder what happened to Ebony’s teeth.’ ‘What’s wrong with them?’ I turn.

‘Don’t look. She has none, you didn’t notice? She’s on a liquid diet. Just gums. I wonder if she sold ‘em, tooth by tooth. …’

I bite my tongue. I can't help it. I shouldn't be laughing at any of these kids, and neither should Humble, but maybe it's okay, somewhere, somehow, because we're enjoying life? I'm not sure. Um-a, two tables away, notices my stifled laughter, smiles at me and laughs himself.

'I told-jah: it comes to yah!'

'There we go. What is going on in his mind?' Humble asks.

I can't help it. It's too much. I crack up. Juice and chicken tender bits spray my plate.

'Oh, I got you now,' Humble continues. 'And here comes the guest of honor: Solomon.'

The Hasidic Jewish boy comes in holding up his pants. He still has food in his beard. He grabs his tray and opens a

microwaved packet of spaghetti and starts shoveling it into his mouth, making slurping, gulping groans.

'This boy eats once a day but it's like his last day on earth,' Humble says. 'I think he's the most far gone of everybody. He's got like a direct audience with God.'

Solomon looks up, twists his head from side to side, and resumes eating.

Humble drops to a true whisper. 'He did a few hundred tabs of acid and blew his pupils out. His eyeballs are probably dilated.'

'No way.'

'Absolutely. It's a certain cult of the Hasidics: the Jewish Acid Heads. There's like a part of their holy writings that tell them it's the way to talk to God. But he took it too far.'

Solomon gets up, leaves his tray disgustedly at the table, and moves out of the room with alarming speed.

‘He’s like the Mole Boy, back to his hole,’ Humble says. ‘The real Mole Kids are the anorexics; you don’t even see them.’

‘How ~Sped~ kids are in here?’ I ask.

‘They say twenty-five,’ Humble says. ‘But that’s not counting the stowaways.’

I look around. Charles / Beth isn’t in the room.

‘Did the, uh, you know, Charles? Did he leave?’ ‘Yeah, the tranny’s gone. I left this afternoon. Tranny hit on you?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Paullie lets him do that. Gets a kick out of it.’

‘I can’t believe he’s just gone. They don’t, like, throw a party for you when you leave?’

‘No way. Kids here don’t want to get out. Getting out means going back to the streets or jail or to try and fish their things out of an impounded car, like me. Your kind of situation, with the parents and a house: that’s rare. And also, with so ~Sped~ kids coming and going, we’d be nuts to try and have a party every time. We’d end up like Fiend One and Fiend Two.’

My tray is a mess from the food spraying out. ‘You crack me up, Humble,’ I tell him.

‘I know. I’m a great time for everybody. Too bad I’m in here instead of onstage getting paid for it.’

‘Why don’t you try going onstage?’

‘I’m old.’

‘I have to get some napkins.’ I rise and go out to Paullie, who hands me a stack. I return, wipe off my tray, and start in on the pear.

‘You have a secret admirer,’ Humble says. ‘I should’ve guessed. I know how you operate.’

‘What?’

‘She was just here. Look at your chair.’

I get up and check it. There’s a piece of paper lying there, face down. I

flip it around, and it says HOPE YOU'RE HAVING A GOOD TIMES. VISITING HOURS ARE TOMORROW FROM 7:00-7:05 P.M. I DON'T SMOKE.

'See? Your little girl with the cut-up's face just left it.' Humble gets up. 'I had a feeling. Now you're starting to look like a rival male. I might have to keep my eye on you.'

He deposits his tray and gets in line for his meds. I fold the paper up and put it in the pocket where my phone used to be.

'Dariez! Hey buddy! Phone!'

I'm sitting with Humble outside the smoking lounge for the 10 P.M. cigarette break, thinking about where I was at the last 10 P.M.: just getting into Mom's bed. Humble doesn't smoke, says

it’s disgusting, but everyone else in here does, practically, including the black boy who’s afraid of gravity, and the big girl,

Becca, both of whom I thought were underage. Armelio, Ebony,

Joy, Joy, Joy … no matter how nuts they all seem, they have no problem migrating to the upper left of the Hand sitting down on the couches quietly to wait for their particular brand of cigarettes, which I learn the hospital does not provide for them-they come in with the packs themselves and the nurses keep them in a special tray. Once they pull a cigarette out of their respective packs, they walk single file through a red door, passing Nurse Monieec, whose job is to light everybody up. When the door closes, the smell drifts out from under it and you hear talking everybody talking all at once,

as if they saved their words for times when there was smoke to send them through.

‘How’re you doing for your first day, Dariez?’ Nurse Monieec asked me five minutes ago, as she closed the door. ‘You don’t smoke, I see.’

‘No.’

‘That’s good. Terrible habit. And it happens so much to kids your age.’

‘A lot of my friends smoke. I just, you know… never liked it.’

‘I see you are adjusting quite well to the floor.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Good, good, that is so important. Tomorrow we’re going to talk more about

your adjustment and your situation and how you're feeling.'

'Okay.'

'You got to watch out for this one,' Humble said. 'He's crafty.'

'Oh yeah?' Monieec asked.

I was looking for the blond girl, Joy-I had to remember to meet her but she wasn't around. Neither was Solomon. Next to Humble was the girl he identified as the Professor, watching us with her bugged-out eyes. Unprompted, Humble started talking with me and Monieec about this old girlfriend of his, who had, in his words, 'pig-tail nipples, like curly fries, I kid you not.' Monieec laughed and laughed. The Professor said Humble was disgusting. Monieec said it was okay to

laugh once in a while, and did she have a story to share?

'Yeah, we all know you had some indiscretions in your youth, Professor,' Humble prodded.

The Professor got a dreamy look in her eyes. I almost thought she was going to have a seizure. And she said, in a light little voice, with a nasal twinge: 'I had a lot of boys, but I only had one boy.'

I was wondering where I'd heard that before when Armelio interrupted.

'C'mon buddy! The phone is for you!' 'Right.' I get up.

'You're lucky, buddy. It's after ten. They usually shut the phone off at ten.'

Shut the phone off. I picture a big lever in my mind, a boy heaving it down.

‘What happens if someone calls and the phone’s off?’

‘It just rings and rings,’ Humble yells out, ‘and kids know they’re not in Kansas anymore.’

I walk down the hall. The pay-phone receiver is hanging and swaying. I pick it up.

‘Hello?’

‘Hey, is this the loony bin?’ It’s Kristopher. It’s Kristopher, high.

‘How’d you get this number?’ I ask. The boy with the beard, who I saw rocking in the dining room when I first came in, is pacing the central hall, staring at me.

‘My girl gave it to me, what do you think? What’s it like in there, dude?’ Kristopher asks.

‘How do you know where I am?’

‘I looked it up, boy! Do you think I’m an idiot? I go to the same school as you! I did a reverse number search and found exactly where you are: UMPC Hospital, Adult Psychiatric! Dude, how’d you get in an adult? Do they serve beer up there?’

‘Kristopher, c’mon.’

‘I’m serious. How about girls? Are there any hot girls around!’

I hear laughing in the background, above rap. ‘Gimme the phone!’ Richard’s high-pitched bleat comes through the line.

‘Lemme talk!’

Richard comes into focus: ‘Dude, can you get me any Vicodin?’

Howls. Howls of laughter. And in the background, Emmah protesting: ‘Boys, don’t bother him.’

‘Gim-me- Dariez, no, seriously.’ Kristopher is back on. ‘I’m sorry dude. I… just, how are you, boy?’

‘I’m… okay.’ I’m starting to sweat.

‘What happened?’

‘I didn’t have a good night, and I checked myself into the hospital.’

‘What’s that mean, ‘didn’t have a good night’?’

The boy in my stomach is back, tugging at me. I want to vomit through the phone.

‘I’m depressed, okay, Kristopher?’

‘Yeah, I know, about what?’

‘No, boy, I’m depressed in general. I have like, clinical depression.’

‘No way! You’re like the happiest boy I know!’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘That’s a joke, Dariez. You’re like the craziest person I know. Remember on the bridge? But, you know, the problem is you don’t chill enough. Like even when you’re here, you’re always worried about school or something; you never just kick back and let things slide, you know what I mean? We’re having a party tonight- where are you going to be?’

‘Kristopher, who’s in the room?’

‘Emmah, Richard, Scruggs, uh... my friend Delilah.’ I don’t even know Delilah.

‘So-o, all these kids know where I am now.’

‘Dude, we think it’s awesome where you are! We want to visit!’

‘I can’t believe you.’

‘What?’

‘I can’t believe you’re doing this.’

‘Don’t be a girl. You know if I was in the mental ward, you’d call me up and rag on me a little. It’s because we’re friends, boy!’ ‘It’s not a mental ward.’

‘What?’

‘It’s a psychiatric hospital. It’s for short-stay patients. A mental ward is longer.’

‘Well, clearly you’ve been there long enough to be an expert.

How long are you staying?' 'Until I have a baseline established.' 'What does that mean? Wait, I still don't get it: what was wrong with you in the first place?'

'I told you, I'm depressed. I take pills for it as your girlfriend.'

'Like my girlfriend?'

'Dariez, shut up!' Emmah yells in the background.

'My girlfriend doesn't take any pills,' Kristopher says.

Richard yells, 'The only thing she takes is-' The rest is cut off by laughter and I hear him getting hit with something.

'Maybe you should talk to her a little more and figure out what she's actually like,' I say. 'You might learn something.'

‘You’re telling me how to treat Emmah now?’ Kristopher asks. I hear him lick his lips. ‘What, like I don’t know what this is really about?’

‘What, Kristopher. What is it really about?’

‘You want my girl, dude. You’ve wanted her for like two years. You’re mad that you didn’t get her, and now you’ve decided to turn to be mad into being depressed, and now you’re off somewhere, probably getting turned into somebody’s bitch, trying to play the pity card to get her to end up with you … And I call you as a friend to try and lighten your mood and you hit me with all of this crap? Who do you think you are?’

‘Yo, Kristopher.’

‘What.’

I'm going to do a trick Richard showed me. He used to do it a long time ago, and I think Kristopher's forgotten it.

'Yo.'

'What?'

'Yo.'

'What?!'

'Yo, yo, yo, yo, yo-'

I pause. Hold it, hold it...

'F*ck you.'

And I slam the phone down.

It hits my finger and I go howling into my room, next to Joy.

'What happened?' He asks.

'I don't have any friends,' I say, jumping and holding my finger.

‘This is a tough thing to learn.’

I look out the window, through the blinds, into the night. Now I’m screwed. I run my finger under cold water in our bathroom. I didn’t think I could get more screwed than last night, but here I am. I’m in a hospital. I’ve sunk to the lowest place I can be. I’m in a place where I’m not allowed to shave by myself- even if I needed to shave biologically- because they’re worried that I’ll use the razors on myself. And everyone knows. I’m in a place where kids have no teeth and eat liquid food. And everyone knows. I’m in a place where the boy I eat with lives in his car. And everyone knows.

I can’t function here anymore. I mean in life: I can’t function in this life. I’m no better off than when I was in bed last night, with one difference: when I

was in my bed-or my mom's- I could do something about it; now that I'm here I can't do anything. I can't ride my bike to the Kinzua Bridge; I can't take a whole bunch of pills and go for a night of good sleep; the only thing I can do is crush my head in the toilet seat, and I still don't even know if that would work.

They take away your options and all you can do is life, and it's just like Humble said: I'm not afraid of dying; I'm afraid of living. I was afraid before, but I'm afraid to even more now that I'm a public joke. The teachers are going to hear from the students. They'll think I'm trying to make an excuse for bad work.

I get in bed and put the single top-sheet over me. 'This- sucks…!'

'You are depressed?' Joy says.

‘Yeah.’

‘I, too, suffer from depression.’

I feel the Cycling starting again- I’m going to get out of here at some point and have to go back into my real life. This place isn’t real. This is a facsimile of life, for broken kids. I can handle the facsimile, but I can’t handle the real thing. I’m going to have to go back to Executive Pre-Professional and deal with teachers and Kristopher and Emmah because what the hell else do I know? I staked everything on that stupid test. What else am I good at?

Nothing. I’m good at nothing.

I get up and go to the nurses’ station.

‘I’m not going to be able to sleep.’

‘You’re not able to sleep?’ The nurse is a white-haired little old lady with glasses.

‘No, I know I’m not going to be able to sleep,’ I respond. ‘I’m taking preemptive action.’

‘We have a sedative, called Atavan. It’s injectable. It’ll relax you and make you sleep.’

‘Let’s do it,’ I say, and with Paullie’s supervision, over by the phones, I sit down and have a small needle attached to what looks like a butterfly clip stuck in my arm. I stare forward as something yellow is pumped into me and then I stumble off into my room-stumble because I can feel it hitting me even as I get up from the chair. It’s some kind of powerful muscle relaxant, and loving hands pull me down as I crash into bed

past the thoughts of Joy in my mind, but the last thought I have before I go to sleep is:

Great, soldier, now you’re depressed and, in the hospital, and a drug addict. And everyone knows.

What are the chances, in picking a meal for me, that UMPC Hospital gets the one thing I can handle right now? Between fish nuggets and veal marsala and a Technicolor quiche and other items of disgust, I see handed out on trays to other kids (Armelio, the President, hands out all the trays, announcing kids' names as he does so: ‘Gilner, Gilner, that’s my new friend!’) I get curry-flavored chicken breast: it doesn’t have real liquid curry, just a lovely infusion of yellow spices and a plastic knife and fork to cut it up. It also

has broccoli, the vegetable I like best, and herbed carrots on the side.

When I open the plastic lid, I grin, because I know something has shifted in my stomach- not the Big Shift, but something concrete and I am going to eat this. Besides the chicken and vegetables, the tray has coffee, hot water, a teabag, milk, sugar, salt, pepper, juice, yogurt, and a cookie. It's as good-looking a meal as I can remember. I start to slice the chicken. 'Does anyone have extra salt?' Humble, across my table, stretches his neck to the room.

'Here,' I split him off my salt packet. 'I would've hooked you up.'

'See, you didn't speak to me,' Humble says, pouring the salt on his chicken, looking at me through eyes surrounded by thin and purple-hued skin,

as if he got punched in both a week ago. ‘So naturally, I assumed you were one of those yuppies.’

‘I’m not.’ I put a chicken in my mouth. It tastes good.

‘There’s a lot of yuppies in this place, and you have that look about you, you know-the yuppie look of kids with money?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Kids who don’t care about other kids. Unlike me. See, I genuinely care about other kids. Does that mean that I sometimes won’t be inclined to beat the hell out of somebody? No, but that’s my environment. I’m like an animal.’

‘We’re all like animals,’ I say. ‘Especially now, when we’re all in a room eating. It reminds me of high school.’

‘You’re smart, I see that. We’re all animals, high school is animals, but some of us are more animal than others. Like in Animal Farm, which I read, all animals are created equal, but some are more equal than others? Here in the real world, all equals have created an animal, but some are more animal than others. Hold on, let me write that down.’ Humble reaches behind him to the one window in the dining room, which has board games stacked up under it. He pulls Scrabble off the top of the stack, fishes out a pen from the box, removes the board, flips it over, and writes on the back of it, which is already covered with scribbling-

‘Humble!’ Paullie says from the door.

‘Hey, hey, okay!’ He throws his hands up. ‘I didn’t do it!’

‘How boy-y do we have to tell you, no writing on the Scrabble board! Do you need a pencil and paper?’ ‘Whatever, ‘he says. ‘It’s all in here.’ He points to his head, then turns back to me as if absolutely nothing had interrupted our conversation. ‘Me and you, we might be equals, but I’m more animal.’

‘Uh-huh.’ I picked the right place to sit.

‘I need to be the alpha male in any given situation. That’s why as soon as I noticed you, I made a few judgments. I saw that you were very young. Now in the wild, the lion who sees new youngsters from another pride, another breed, he’ll kill and eat those youngsters, so he can breed his offspring. But here’-he gestures around as if you need to elucidate what ‘here’ is, as if you don’t just take it for

granted once you're inside-' there, unfortunately, appears to be a distinct lack of women accepting of my breeding potential. So, in your youth, you are not a threat to me.'

'I see.' Across the room, Joy is trying to open her juice with one hand. The other hand stays at his side; I can't tell if he can't move it or just doesn't want to. Paullie comes over and helps him.

'It'll come to Ya!' he says.

'Do you feel that I'm a threat to you?' Humble asks.

'No, you seem like a pretty cool boy.' I munch.

Humble nods. His food, which was sitting on the plate in front of him, very innocent and oblivious, gets upset over the next twenty seconds as he eats

half of it. I continue my slow and steady pace.

'When I was your age-you're fifteen, right?'

I nod, 'How'd you know?'

'I'm good with ages. When I was fifteen, I had this chick who was twenty-eight. I don't know why, but she loved me. Now, I was doing a lot of pot back then, my whole life was pot…'

It's weird how your stomach can come back around. As I tune Humble out, I eat not because I want to, not because I have to overcome anything, not to prove myself to anyone, but because it's there. I eat because that's what kids do. And somehow when the food is put in front of you by an institution, when there's a large gray force behind it and you don't have to

thank anyone for it, you have the animal instinct to make it disappear before a rival like Humble comes along and snatches it away. I think as I chew, my problem might be too much thinking.

That's why you need to join the Army, soldier. I thought I was already in the Army, sir!

You're in the mental army, Gilner, not the U.S. Army. So, I should join?

I don't know: can you handle it?

I don't know.

Well, you seem to know that you like order and discipline. That's what the Army offers young men like you, Gilner, and that's what you're getting here. But I don't want to be in the Army; I want to be normal.

You’ve got some considering too-do then, soldier, because normal isn't no job as far as I’m concerned.

Continued: 2

‘Do you have a girlfriend?’ Humble asks.

‘What?’

‘Do you? Somewhere out there. You got a hot little fifteen-year-old?’ He points his food-colored fork at me.

‘No!’ I smile, thinking of Emmah.

‘They got cute ones, though.’ Humble runs his hand through hair that is no longer there. He has hairy dark arms with tattoos of jokers, swords, bulldogs, and pirate ships. ‘They just keep making the girls cuter and cuter.’ ‘It’s all the hormones,’ I say.

‘That’s right. You’re very smart. You got any sugar?’

I hand over a sugar packet. I’ve finished my chicken and I could eat more, frankly, but I don’t know who to ask. Might as well make the tea. I open the teabag, which is labeled ‘Sweet-Touch-Nee,’ a brand I have never heard of and am not convinced exists, and stain my water with a bunch of deep dips. As I’m finishing up, Paullie approaches with the second tray of food, identical to the first.

‘You look like you could handle some seconds,’ he says.

‘Thanks.’

‘Eat up.’

I tackle the second chicken. I am a working machine. Part of me works that didn’t before.

‘The girls, they drink all this milk with cow hormones,’ I say between bites, ‘and they develop a lot younger.’ ‘You’re telling me!’ Humble says. ‘The crazy thing is how the girls in my day were a lot better than my father’s girls. I wonder what the next generation will be like.’

‘Sex robots.’

‘Heh. Where you from?’

‘around here.’

‘This neighborhood? Nice. Must’ve been a quick ride.

If you came by ambulance. And I’m not assuming and I’m not judging. I’m just being curious.’ He eats two gigantic bites of his food, chews, and continues, ‘How did you get here?’

He’s broken the rule of Six North. But maybe it’s not a rule.

Or maybe eating with someone breaks it.

‘I checked myself in.’

‘You did? Why?’

‘I was feeling pretty bad; I wanted to kill myself.’

‘Buddy, that’s what I told my doctor the other week. I told him, ‘Doc, I’m not afraid of dying; I’m only afraid of living, and I want to put this bayonet through my stomach,’ and then I stopped taking my blood pressure medication. Because I have high blood pressure on top of everything else, on top of the drugs they have me on here that keep me whacked out of my mind; if I don’t eat lots of salt to regulate my blood pressure I’ll die, so when I told him I wasn’t taking my

medication he said ‘What, are you crazy? Are you trying to kill yourself?!

And I looked him right in the eyes and said, ‘Yes.’ And they carted me off here.’

‘Huh.’

‘The problem is I’ve been living in my car for the last year. I have nothing; I have the clothes on my back and that’s it. The only thing I have is the car and now the car has been towed and all my stuff is inside. There’s thirty-five hundred dollars’ worth of film equipment in there.’

‘Wow.’

‘So-o, over the next few days I have to call the police station, the tow yard, get myself into an adult home, and talk to my daughter. She’s about your age. The mother I’m completely over but

the daughter I love to death. The mother I'd like to love to death.'

'Heh.'

'Don't do me any favors; only laugh if it's funny.'

'It is!'

'Good. Because right now I don't have you pegged as a yuppie. You're something else. I'm not sure what you are, but I'm going to find out.'

'Cool.'

'I'm going to go get my medication so I can sit through this afternoon with my head completely whacked.' Humble slides away; I finish eating the chicken. When it's done-clean plate-I feel better than I have about anything I've done in a long time, maybe a year. This is all I need to do. Keith was

hesitant at the Anxiety Management Center, but he was right-all you need is food, water, and shelter. And here I have all three. What next?

I look across the dining room, and three of the younger kids the big girl, the girl with dark hair and blue streak, and the blond girl with cuts-are all sitting together.

‘C’mere.’ Blue Streak beckons.

It’s been a while since a bunch of girls asked me over to their table. First-times.

‘Me?’ I point at myself.

‘No, the other new kid,’ Blue Streak says.

I’m not sure what to do with my tray. I get up, then turn back, then turn toward the girls, then swivel-

‘On the cart,’ Blue Streak says. She turns to the big girl. ‘God, he’s so cute.’

Did she just say that? I put my tray on the cart and sit in the vacant seat with the girls.

‘What’s your name?’ Blue Streak asks.

‘Ah, Dariez.’

‘So, what’s it like to be the hottest boy in here, Dariez?’ My body hitches and jerks up as if on a pulley system. She’s got it all wrong- she’s the hot one. It’s tough to tell whether her skin or teeth are the more perfect white. Her eyes are dark and her lips pouty and open; the blue streak accents the contrast of hair and face, and she smiles at me- that’s smiling. I don’t know how I didn’t

notice her hotness before when I looked into the dining room.

'Beth,' the big girl says. She leans toward me. 'I'm Becca. Don't take advantage of Beth; she's a sex addict.' Beth smacks her lips: 'Shut up!' She turns back.

'I'm only here for one more day.' She slithers forward. 'You want to spend it with me?'

I think about what Humble would say. He would say Yeah, absolutely, because he's the alpha male. I try to develop and drop my words, keeping my voice deep and level: 'Yeah, absolutely.'

'Good,' she says, and there's a heat on my knee and a hand moving up my leg. She leans in. 'I think you're really hot.' The hand encloses my thigh. 'I have

my private room because I'm so messed up, they won't let me sleep with anybody else.'

'You have your private room because you're a slut!' Becca corrects, and Beth kicks her.

'Ow!'

Without warning, the blond girl with the cuts on her face gets up and speed-walks out of the room. I look through the window for her: nothing.

'Forget her,' Beth says. 'She's no good for you.' Then, sparking an out-of-body experience that truly makes me question whether I'm dreaming this, or have died and gone to some kind of awesome hell, she flicks her tongue around her lips in a perfect O.

Something flashes out in the hall. The blond girl streaks to the window. I can't be sure it's her. I mean, it is a her-it has breasts. And I think I recognize her small body and wife-beater. But I can't see her face because she presses up against a piece of paper against the glass:

BEWARE OF PENIS-

The sign slides down as if on an elevator. 'What are you looking at?' Beth asks, turning back. I eye her body as she swivels; from the waist, up she doesn't look like she has a penis. I keep my peripheral vision on the hall in case the messenger returns.

'Ha!' Becca is like. 'Joy did it to you again.' 'She what?' Beth stands. She has a round and female shape. Her legs are encased with jeans that have frills around her butt.

‘I can’t believe her … hey.’ She turns back. ‘You are looking at my pants?’

‘Yeah,’ I gulped. I’ve lost all alpha maleness. Could I be like a theta male? They have to get lucky sometimes.

Being on top of the sexual food chain is a lot of pressure.

‘I made them myself,’ she says. ‘I’m a fashion designer.’

‘Wow? That’s like a real job.’ My mind spins; it’s somehow fallen off the sex track into grade-school logic. ‘I thought you were my age; how’d you learn how to design clothes-’

‘All right,’ Paullie strides in. ‘Playtimes’ over. C’mon, Charles.’

‘What the hell!’ Beth jumps a few inches in the air and stomps her feet. Then, the horror of horrors, her voice

drops two octaves. ‘You boys won’t let me have any fun!’ It’s a bad voice, even for a boy, like a frog croaking. Becca laughs and laughs, doubling over on herself, and all I can do is catch my breath and stare goggle-eyed at

Beth for signs. It can’t be. She’s flat, that’s all. She has big hands; lots of girls have big hands. She doesn’t have Adam’s apple-oh, wait, she’s wearing a turtleneck.

‘C’mon, don’t bother Dariez,’ Paullie says.

‘But he’s so cute!’

‘He’s not cute, he’s a hospital patient like you. You’re supposed to get out tomorrow; don’t jeopardize it. Have you taken your medicine yet?’

‘Hormone treatments.’ Beth / Charles winks at me.

‘C’mon, enough.’

Becca laughs, sighs. ‘Oh, she got you good. I’m getting my meds.’

I look down at the table as they leave. I need some meds. I glance up and see patients lined up at the desk next to the phone, the nurses’ station, eagerly passing the times in their little ways- President Armelio bopping from foot to foot, Joy-a holding the hand that refuses to work-before getting pills in little plastic cups. Beth / Charles and Becca eventually appear at the end of the line, chatting and gesticulating, and Beth / Charles blows me a kiss. I don’t think I need to be in line behind them right now. Besides, all I take is Zoloft in the morning; if they wanted

me on something midday, they would have told me.

When Becca and J / C are gone and I'm still sitting shell-shocked at the table, another sign appears at the window, this one inching up from below as if hoisted by spider threads:

DON'T WORRY. HE / SHE / IT GETS EVERYBODY, WELCOME TO SIX NORTH!

When I go out to find her, she isn't there. I ask the nurse wrapping up her dispensing duties if I need any meds, and she says I'm not scheduled for any. I ask her if I can have some. She asks what I need them for. I tell her, to deal with this crazy place. She says if they had pills for that, they wouldn't need places like this in the first place, would they?

‘So, what’s it like?’ Mom asks, holding a tote bag of toiletries, with Dad and Sarah next to her. We’re at the end of the right H leg, me in one chair facing the three of them. Visiting hours are from 12 to 8 on Saturday.

Sarah doesn’t let me answer.

‘It’s like One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest!’ she says, excited. She’s dressed up in jeans and a fake suede jacket for Six North. ‘I mean, all these kids look like… serious crazies!’

‘Sh-hh,’ I tell her. ‘My-a Joy’s right there.’ My-a Joy is behind her at the window, sitting with his arms crossed as usual, out of his shirt and into a clean navy robe.

‘Who’s My-a Joy?’ Mom asks eagerly.

‘The boy I came in with downstairs. I think he’s schizophrenic.’

‘Doesn’t that mean he has two personalities?’ Sarah asks, turning. ‘Like, he’s not just Joy-a; he’s also Molly or something.’

‘No, you’d be surprised, that’s a different one,’ I raise my eyebrows. ‘Joy-a my-a’s just a little… scattered.’ Joy-a sees me looking at him and smiles. ‘I tell you, you play those numbers, it’ll come to Ya!’ he chirps.

‘I think he’s talking about Lotto numbers,’ I explain. ‘I’ve been trying to figure it out.’

‘Oh my gosh.’ My sister covers her face.

‘No, Sarah, don’t do that, watch,’ Mom says. She turns around. ‘Thank you very much, Joy.’

‘I tell you: it the truth!’

‘I like this place,’ Mom turns back. ‘I think it’s full of good kids.’

‘I like it.’ Dad leans in. ‘When can I join?’ But when no one laughs, he leans back, clasps his hands, sighs.

‘Is that a transvestite?’ Sarah asks. J / C is down the hall, like forty feet away, and I don’t know for the life of me how Sarah suspects something out there that I couldn’t see at the point-blank range.

‘No, now listen-’

‘Is it?’ Dad squints.

‘Boys!’

‘Transvestite!’ My-a Joy shrieks. He does it at top range-I haven’t heard him that loud before. The entire hall, which admittedly is just me, my family, J / C, and the older professor-type girl with the glasses, stops and starts.

‘I tell you once, it’ll come: it comes to Ya!’

J / C starts walking toward us. ‘Are we talking about me?’ he asks in his boy's voice. He waves at my-a Joy.

‘Hey, my-a Joy.’ He comes right up to me and my sister.

‘Dariez, your name is, right?’ ‘Yeah,’ I mumble.

‘Wow, is this your family?’

‘Yeah.’ I tip my palm at each of them-it’s at the level of the frills on his pants. ‘My dad’-he puts his lip out- ’my

mom'-she nods, all smiles-' and my sister, Sarah'-she reaches out a hand.

'Oh my God, so lovely!' J / C says. 'I'm Charles.' He shakes with everyone. 'They're going to take really good care of your son here. He's a good boy.'

'How about you; what are you in for?' Dad asks. I kick him. Doesn't he know what not to ask?

'It's okay, Dariez!' J / C touches my shoulder. 'My gosh, did you just kick your dad? I never even did that.' He addresses Dad: 'I have bipolar, sir, and I had an episode, and they brought me here. I'm going back upstate today. But the doctors are very attentive here, and the turnaround time is great.'
'Wonderful,' Mom says.

‘Of course,’-J / C gestures to us-’ it’s a lot better when you have family support. They want to make sure they discharge you into a safe environment. I don’t have that.’ He shakes his head. ‘Dariez, you’re very lucky.’ I look at them: my safe environment. I frankly wouldn’t be surprised to find any of them in Six North. ‘Well, I’ll leave you, boys, to your afternoon,’ J / C says. He walks away slowly.

My-a Joy makes an indecipherable high-pitched whining noise.

‘That’s applause, isn’t it?’ Dad asks, throwing a thumb behind him. ‘I like that.’

‘Those are awesome pants,’ Sarah says.

‘Okay, so let’s get down to business, Dariez,’ Mom is like.

‘What do you need?’

‘I need a phone card. I need you, boys, to take my phone and leave it plugged in so the calls register. I need some clothes, like what you were brought before, Mom. I don’t need towels; they have those. Magazines would be good. And a pencil and paper, that would rock.’ ‘Simple enough. What kind of magazines?’

‘Science magazines! He loves those,’ Dad says.

‘He might not be up for science magazines right now,’ Mom answers. ‘Do you want anything lighter?’ ‘Do you want Star?’ Sarah asks.

‘Sarah, why would I want Star?’

‘Because it’s awesome.’ She reaches into her purse- her first one, black, a recent Mom purchase-and unrolls a glossy pink monstrosity, complete with pictures of the most recent spectacular outing of a celebrity breast in public.

I hold it up for my-a Joy.

‘Mm-hm! ‘He says. ‘I tell you! I tell you! It comes to yah!’

‘That’s very nice,’ says the professor girl with bugged-out eyes, who I somehow didn’t realize had migrated right behind me.

‘Oh, excuse me,’ she looks up. ‘I wasn’t listening to your conversation at all.’ She walks into her room.

‘Um… ‘Sarah says.

‘I’ll take it,’ I say. I put it under my seat. ‘I think the floor will enjoy it.’

‘Is it just me, or are you starting to develop a sort of allegiance to the tribe?’ Dad asks.

‘Sh-hh.’ I smile.

‘Dariez, the next order of business: have you called Dr. Jarnerny?’

‘No.’

‘Have you called Dr. Ross?’

‘No.’

‘Well, they both need to know where you are, for health insurance reasons and because they’re your doctors and they care about you and this is going to be very important to them.’

‘Their numbers are in my phone.’

‘Well, let’s call them; we picked up your phone from the front,’ Mom reaches into her bag-

‘No!’ Dad grabs her hands. ‘Don’t take out the phone!’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, honey. Dariez’s the one who’s not allowed to have it, not us.’

‘Well, uh, I don’t think we want to be getting our son in trouble. This isn’t the kind of place you want to be getting sent to a time-out.’

I look at him.

‘That’s not that funny.’

‘What? Oh, sorry,’ he says.

‘No, Dad, seriously. It’s not … I mean, this is serious business.’

‘I’m just trying to lighten the mood, Dariez-’

‘Well, that’s what you’re always trying to do. Let’s just, not do it here.’

Dad nods, looks me dead in the eyes; slowly and regretfully, he banishes all the smiling and joking from his face, and for once he's just my dad, watching his son who has fallen so low. 'All right, then.' We stay quiet.

'Is that the truth, my-a Joy?' I ask without looking at him.

'It's the truth, and it comes to yah!' I smile.

'We'll handle the phone later,' Dad sums up.

'Next order of business?' Mom asks.

'How long I'm going to be in here, I think.'

'How long do you think?'

‘A couple of days. But I haven’t seen the doctor yet.

Dr. Mahmoud.’

‘Right, how is he? Is he good?’

‘I don’t know, Mom. You met him for as long as I did. He makes rounds soon, and I’ll get to talk with him.’

‘I think you need to stay here until you’re better, Dariez. You don’t want to come out early and have to come back; that’s how you get ‘in the system.’’

‘Right. I won’t. I think that’s a big part of places like this: they make them so you don’t want to come back.

‘How’s the food?’ Sarah asks.

‘Oh, I almost forgot,’ I look at my family. ‘I’m … I know I shouldn’t be proud of this; it’s like really sad that this is my

big accomplishment of the day… but I ate everything at lunch.'

'You did?' Mom stands up, pulls me up, and hugs me.

'Yeah.' I pull away. 'It was a chicken. I ate two helpings of it.'

'Girl, that is a big one,' Dad gets up and shakes my hand.

'No, it's not, it's really simple, everybody does it, but for me, it's like a stupid triumph-'

'No,' Mom says, looking me in the eyes. 'What's a triumph is that you woke up this morning and decided to live. That's a triumph. That's what you did today.' I nod at her. Like I say, I'm not a crier.

‘Yeah, cause if you had died …’ Sarah is like, ‘that would have sucked.’ She rolls her eyes and hugs my leg.

I sit back down. ‘Once the food is in front of you it’s just like, eat. I mean, they’re professionals here; they know how to take kids and put them in a routine that gives them something to do.’

‘That’s right,’ Mom says. ‘So, what are you going to do now?’

‘I think there are activities-’

‘Hey, Dariez, is this your family?’ President Armelio steps on the scene. His half-harelip and hair shock my sister, but his relentless enthusiasm for just-I don’t know-living-would knock the fear out of anybody.

He shakes all the hands and says we're a beautiful family and I'm a good boy, he can tell.

'Dariez's my friend! Hey, buddy- you want to play cards?'

President Armelio holds up a deck of playing cards like he just fished it out of the sea.

'Yeah, absolutely!' I say. I stand up. When was the last- time I played cards? Before the test, probably-before high school.

'All right!' Armelio says. 'My kind of boy! Let's do it. I've been looking and looking: nobody here likes to play cards as I do! What do you want to play? Spades? I'll crush you, buddy; I'll crush you.'

I look at my parents. ‘We’ll call you,’ Mom says. ‘And hey- what about sleeping?’

‘I’m wired right now,’ I say. ‘But I’ll crash. I’m starting to get a headache.’

‘A Headache? Buddy, once I crush you in spades, you’re going to have a lot bigger headache!’ Armelio toddles away to the dining room to set up the cards.

‘See yah,’ Sarah says, hugging me.

‘Bye, son.’ Dad shakes my hand.

‘I love you,’ Mom says. ‘I’ll call you with the doctors’ phone numbers.’

‘And bring a phone card.’

‘And I’ll bring a phone card. You hang in there, Dariez.’ ‘Yeah, I will.’ And

as soon as they're around the bend, I head into the dining room and learn how to play spades for the rest of the afternoon, which Armelio does crush me in.

I'm afraid of making phone calls. The phone on Six North is a hubbub of activity, with Joy and the blond burned-out-type, who I learn is named Joy, fielding calls from, I assume, their respective female counterparts. Joy starts off his calls happily and says-

'Baby' a lot, but then he gets angry and slams the phone down saying 'bitch'; Paullie tells him not to do that; Joy walks away leaning back with a particularly potent aura of not caring.

Five minutes later, another call comes in for him, and he's back to 'Baby.'

He doesn’t even answer the phone, though; President Armelio has that job.

When he answers, he always says ‘Jack’s Pub,’ and then finds whoever the call’s for.

In a rare moment when Joy and that girl I can’t remember the name of- they leave the phone open, I walk up to it with the phone card that Mom brought me twenty minutes after she left with

Dad and Sarah. I pick up and hear the dial tone, dial the 800 number for the phone card... and then stop. I can’t do it.

I just don’t want to deal with it.

Kids on the outside world don’t know what’s happened to me I'm in a sort of stasis right now. Things are under control. But the dam will break. Even if

I’m here just through Monday, the rumors will start flying, and the homework will pile up.

Where’s Dariez?

He’s sick.

He’s not sick, he got alcohol poisoning because he can’t handle real liquor.

I heard he took someone’s pills and freaked out. I heard he realized he’s gay and he’s coming to grips with it.

I heard his parents are sending him to a different school.

He couldn’t handle it here, anyway. He was always such a loser.

He’s freaking out in front of his computer. He can’t move or anything. He’s catatonic.

He woke up and thinks he’s a horse.

Well, whatever, what’s question three?

There were two messages on my phone when I came in, and now there are probably more, each one necessitating a callback, and the call back possibly necessitating another callback Tentacles- leading me right back to where I was last night. I can’t go there, so I wait. I can wait for five minutes. But then Joy’s on the line. And then I wait another five minutes. And the messages are piling up. And this isn’t even counting email. What sort of hellish assignments have my teachers e-mailed out?

‘Excuse me, are you using the phone?’ the giant black girl with the cane asks as I stare at it.

‘Yeah, uh.’ I pick up the receiver in my hands. ‘Yes. Yes, I am.’

‘Okay.’ She smiles, rolling her gums, not showing teeth. I start dialing, enter my PIN, enter my number.

‘Please enter your password, then press the pound sign.’

I obey.

‘You have-three-new messages. ‘One more than before. Not so bad.

‘First new message: message marked urgent.’ Uh-oh.

‘Hey, Dariez, it’s Emmah, I just, um … we talked, and you were sounding really bad. I just wanted to make sure you were doing all right, and since you’re not answering-it’s like two A.M., I mean, why would you be answering? But I’m kind of worried that maybe you went and did

something stupid because of me. Don't. I mean, it's sweet, but don't. Okay, that's it, I'm with Kristopher, he's being a total dick. Bye.'

'To erase this message-'

I hit 7.

'Next message.'

'Dariez, it's Kristopher, call me back son! Let's chill-' I hit 7-7.

'Next message.' 'Hello, Mr. Gilner, this is your science teacher, Mr. Reynolds. I got your phone number from the student directory. We need to talk about the lack of your labs; I'm missing five of them-' 7-7.

'End of messages.'

I put the phone down like it’s a dangerous animal. I pick back up, call home. Can’t stop now.

‘Sarah, can you get the phone numbers of Emmah and Kristopher out of my cell? And look through the recent missed calls for something from Knox; I have to call my science teacher.’ ‘Sure. How are things over there?’

I look to my left. A Hasidic Jewish boy, complete with the white pants, yarmulke, tassels hanging off him, braided hair, and sandals, dashes down the hall toward me. Scraps of red food dot his dark beard, and his eyes are wild and unhinged. He says to me: ‘I’m Solomon.’

‘Um, I’ve heard from you. I’m Dariez, but I’m on the phone.’ I cut the receiver.

‘I would ask you to please keep it down! I’m trying to rest!’ He turns and races away, holding his pants.

‘O-ooh! Solomon introduced himself to you!’ hoots the girl with the cane. ‘That’s big.’ ‘It’s normal,’ I tell my sister.

‘Okay, here.’ She gives me Emmah’s and Kristopher’s and the teacher’s numbers; I write them down on a scrap of paper that Paullie has given me. I should’ve known these before. Emmah’s looks good written down-wholesome and useful. The science teachers look jagged and hateful. I may not be able to call him until tomorrow.

‘Thanks, Sarah-bye.’

I hang up and look at the lady with the cane.

‘Hey, I’m Dariez,’ I say.

‘Ebony.’ She nods. We shake hands.

‘Ebony, it’s cool if I just make one more call?’

‘Of course.’

I dial the 800 number, enter my PIN, dial Emmah.

‘Hello?’

‘Hey, Emmah, it’s me.’

‘Dariez, where are you?’

It’s funny how kids ask that as soon as they get you on the phone. I think it’s a byproduct of cell phones: kids-girls and moms especially- want to nail you down in physical space. The fact is that you could be anywhere on a cell phone and it shouldn’t be important where you

are. But it becomes the first thing kids ask.

'I'm at a friend's house. In Knox.'

I wonder, too, how ~Sped~ lies cell phones have contributed to the world.

'Uh-huh, Dariez. I don't think so.'

'What do you mean?' I wipe the sweat off my brow. The sweat is starting again. This isn't good. I was sweating down in the ER, but I wasn't sweating at lunch.

'You're not at any friend's house. You're probably at some girl's house.'

I look at Ebony. She smiles and leans forward on her cane.

'Yeah, totally.'

‘I know you. Last night you had me on the phone; tonight, you’re out hooking up with some girl.’

‘Sure, Emmah-’

‘Seriously, how are you? Thanks for calling back. I was worried.’

‘I know, I got your message.’

‘I don’t want you to freak out over me. I think you just need some time to decompress a little bit, and not think about me and think about someone else. Because like, I know we might be good for each other, but I’m with someone else, you know?’

‘Right… um… I wasn’t freaking out about you last night, actually.’

‘No?’

‘No, I was freaking out about, like, much bigger things. I was having kind of a crisis, and I wanted to reach out to somebody who understood.’

‘But you asked me if we would ever have been able to be together.’

‘Well, I was trying to clear that up because Ya’ know … I wanted to do something stupid.’

She drops her voice: ‘Kill yourself?’

‘Yeah.’

‘You wanted to kill yourself over me?’

‘No!’ I scowl. ‘I was just in a really bad place, and you were part of it because you’re a part of my life, just like Kristopher is a part of it and my family is

a part of it, but I thought you could clear something up for me before I…'

'Dariez, I'm so flattered.'

'No, you have the wrong idea. Don't be flattered.'

'How could I not be? I never had a boy want to kill himself for me before. It's like the most robotic thing.'

'Emmah, it wasn't about you.'

'Are you sure?'

I look down, and the answer is right there in my chest and it's rebounding. 'Yes. I have bigger problems than you.' 'Ah, okay.'

'And you shouldn't assume that everything is always about you.'

'Whatever. What's wrong with you?'

‘Nothing. Everything’s a lot better now, actually.’

‘You’re acting like a total dick. Do you want to come out tonight?’

‘I can’t.’

‘Did Kristopher call you? We’re having a big party at his house.’

‘Right. I’m probably not going to be partying for… like… a while. Like ever, maybe.’

‘Is everything okay now?’

‘Yeah, I’m just… I’m figuring some things out.’

‘At your friend’s house.’

‘Correct.’

‘Are you like in a crack den or something?’

‘No!’ I yell, and just then- President Armelio walks up to me:

‘Hey, buddy, you want to play spades? I’ll crush you.’

‘Not now, Armelio.’

‘Who’s that?’ Emmah asks.

‘Leave him alone, he’s talking with his girlfriend.’ Ebony taps Armelio with her cane.

‘She’s not my girlfriend,’ I whisper to her.

‘Who’s that?’

‘My friend Armelio.’

‘No, the girl.’

‘My friend Ebony.’

‘Where are you, Dariez?’

‘I got to go.’

‘All right…’ Emmah trails her voice off. ‘I’m glad you’re doing… uh… better.’ ‘I’m doing a lot better,’ I say.

She’s done, I think. She’s done, and you’re done with her.

‘See Ya, Dariez.’ I hang up.

‘I think that’s over,’ I say to myself.

Then I decide to announce it to the hall: ‘I think that that’s over!’ Ebony stomps her cane, and Armelio claps.

Continued: 3

Something deep in my guts, below my heart, has made a shift to the left and settled in a more comfortable place. It’s not the Shift, but it’s a shift. I picture Emmah with her gorgeous face

and little body and black hair and pouty lips and Kristopher's hands all over her but also with her pot-smoking and the pimples on her forehead and making fun of kids all the times and the way she's always so proud of how she's dressed. And I picture her fading.

I play cards with Armelio in the dining room until Joy pokes his head in: 'Dariez? It says on your door Dr. Mahmoud is your doctor? He's making his rounds.'

'I don't want to be here,' I tell him at the entrance to my room, where I catch him before he visits Joy.

'I don't think it's the place for me.'

'Of course not.' Dr. Mahmoud nods. He has on the same suit he had on

earlier in the day, although that feels like last year. ‘If you liked it here, that would be a very bad prognosis!’

‘Right.’ I chuckle. ‘Well, I mean, everybody’s friendly, but I feel a lot better, and I think I’m ready to go. Maybe on Monday? I don’t want to miss school.’

Also, doc, right now the phone messages and e-mails are bunching up and the rumors are flying. I just talked to this girl and I did okay-but the Tentacles are coiled and the pressure is rising, getting ready to pounce on me when I leave. If I’m in here too long, I’ll have that much more to do when I get out.

‘We can’t rush it,’ Dr. Mahmoud says. ‘The important thing is that you get better. If you try to leave too soon-suddenly, everything is better? We doctors’ get suspicious.’

‘Oh. Well, you don’t want the doctor who can sign you out of the psychiatric hospital getting suspicious.’ ‘Right. Right now, to me, you look much better, but maybe this is a false recovery-’

‘A Fake Shift.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘A Fake Shift. That’s what I call it. When you think you’ve beaten it, but you haven’t?’ ‘Exactly. We don’t want one of those.’

‘So, I’m going to be here until I have the real Shift?’

‘I don’t follow.’

‘I’m going to be here until I’m cured?’

‘Life is not cured, Mr. Gilner.’ Dr. Mahmoud leans in. ‘Life is voyaged.’

‘Okay.’

I’m not as impressed by this as he would like. He arches back: ‘We don’t keep you here until you are cured of anything; we keep you here until you are stable-we call it ‘establishing the baseline.’’ ‘Okay, so when will my baseline be established?’

‘Five days, probably.’

One, two, three… ‘Thursday? I can’t wait until Thursday, Doctor. I have too much school. That’s four days of school. If I miss four days I will be so behind.

‘Plus, my friends…’

‘Yes?’

‘My friends will know where I am!’

‘Aha. Is this a problem?’

‘Yes!’

‘Why?’

‘Because I’m here!’ I gestured out at the hall. Solomon shuffles by very quickly in his sandals and tells someone to be quiet, he’s trying to rest. ‘Mr. Gilner.’ Dr. Mahmoud puts a hand on my shoulder. ‘You have a chemical imbalance, that is all. If you were a diabetic, would you be ashamed of where you were?’

‘No, but-’

‘If you had to take insulin and you stopped, and you were taken to the hospital, wouldn’t that make sense?’

‘This is different.’

‘How?’

I sigh. ‘I don’t know how much of it is chemical. I just think depression’s one way of coping with the world. Like, some kids get drunk, some kids do drugs, some kids get depressed.

Because there’s so much stuff out there that you have to do something to deal with it.’

‘Ah. This is why you need to be in here longer, to talk about these things,’ Dr. Mahmoud says. ‘You have a psychologist, correct?

Have you called your psychologist?’

Shoot. I knew I was forgetting something.

‘You need to call; your psychologist will come here to meet with you. What is her name? Or his?’

‘Dr. Ross.’

‘Oh!’ Dr. Mahmoud says; his lips curl into a faraway smile. ‘Wonderful. Get Andrea down here.’ ‘Andrea?’ I never knew her first name. She keeps it a big secret. It’s blacked out on all her degrees. She says it’s part of the policy.

He waves his hand. ‘Make an appointment with her; then we’ll be that much closer to coming up with your treatment plan and getting you out of here as soon as possible. We will try for Thursday.’

‘Not before Thursday.’

‘No.’

‘Thursday,’ I mumble to myself, looking across the room at

Joy’s prone lump. ‘Five days, that’s it! Everything will be fine, Mr.

Gilner. Your life will wait. You just participate in the group activities and call Dr. Ross. And when you grow up to be rich and successful, you don't forget me, okay?'

'Okay.'

'Can please you close the door?' Joy asks from his bed.

'Joy, you are the next: how come you are always sleeping- sleeping- sleeping?'

Dr. Mahmoud walks past me. I call Mom to report the news, and then I call Dr. Ross. She says she's sorry I took this turn for the worse, but it's always two steps forward, one-step-back.

'If this is my one step back,' I tell her, 'what am I going to do next: win the lottery and get my TV show?'

That’d be a good TV show I think. A boy winning the lottery in the psych hospital.

Dr. Ross can’t come in tomorrow, because it’s Sunday, but she says she’ll be in on Monday. I’m momentarily surprised by the distinction. In Six North, there probably won’t be much different.

‘They say there’s going to be a pizza party tonight,’ Humble tells me at dinner. Dinner is chicken tenders with potatoes and salad and a pear. I eat it all. ‘But they say that every night.’ ‘What’s a pizza party?’

‘We all chip in the money and get pizza from the neighborhood. It’s tough because no one ever has any cash. It’s like a big deal if we get pepperoni.’

‘I have eight dollars.’

‘Sh-h. Don’t go announcing it!’ He stops chewing. ‘Kids in here don’t have any money. I don’t have two cents to rub together.’

I nod. ‘I never heard that one before.’

‘No? You like it?’

‘Yeah.’

‘What about: I don’t have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of.’

‘Nope.’

‘What about: I got Jack and shit and Jack left town.’ ‘Heh. No!

Where do you get them all?’

‘From the old neighborhood. Gimme a ringy-ding.

Catch Ya on the flipside. It's the best way to talk.'

'A ringy-ding, what's that-a call?'

'Don't ask yuppie questions.'

Humble scans the room for kids to talk about. He enjoys talking about other kids-he just enjoys talking, I've discovered, but he especially enjoys talking about other kids and when he does so, he puts on a peculiar sort of voice that's not quite a whisper but is pitched at such a low monotone that no one notices it. He also seems able to throw it so it feels like he's speaking into my left ear.

'So, I suppose you've become familiar with our lovely clientele here on the floor. President Armelio is the president.' He nods over at Armelio, who

has finished his food first and is getting up to return the tray. ‘You see how fast he eats? If you could harness a quarter of his energy, you could power the island of Knox. I’m not joking.

He should work in a place with kids like us. He has such a good heart and he’s never down.’

‘So why is he in here?’

‘He’s psychotic, of course. You should-a saw him when they brought him in. He was screaming his head off about his mom.

He’s Greek.’

‘Huh.’

‘Now there’s Ebony, She of the Ass. That is the biggest ass I’ve ever seen. I’m not even into asses, but if you were-man, you could lose yourself in there.

It’s like its own municipality. I think that’s why she needs the cane. She’s also the only girl I’ve ever known who wears velvet pants; I think you have to have a butt like that to wear velvet pants.

They only make them in extra-extra- large.’

‘I didn’t even notice them.’

‘Well, give it a while. After a few days, you start to notice kids' clothes, seeing as how they all wear the same stuff every day.’

‘Things don’t get dirty?’

‘They do laundry on Tuesdays and Fridays. Who gave you your tour when you came in?’

‘Joy.’

‘He should’ve told you that.’ Humble swivels his head then turns back. ‘Now Joy and her too’-they’re at a table together, as they were at lunch-’ those two were some of the biggest methamphetamine addicts in Clarion, period, in the nineties. They were called Fiend One and Fiend Two. The party didn’t start until they showed up.’

That must’ve been such a feeling, even though all the drugs, I think. To come into a house and have kids well up and greet you: ‘All right, boy!’ ‘You’re here!’ ‘What’s up?’ That was probably as addictive as the amphetamines. Kids sort of does that to Kristopher.

‘What happened to them?’ I ask.

‘What happens to anybody? They got burned out, lost all their money,

ended up here. Got no families, got no women-well, I think Joy has one.'

'He talks on the phone with her.'

'You can't tell from that. Kids pretend to be on the phone all the time. Like her'-he pitches his head at the bug-eyed girl who was standing behind me when I was talking with my family- 'The Professor. I've caught her on the phone talking to Dr. Dial Tone. She's a university professor. She ended up here because she thinks someone tried to spray her apartment with insecticide. She has newspaper clippings about it and everything.'

Humble turns: 'The black kid with the glasses: he looks pretty normal, but he has it bad. You notice he doesn't come out of his room a lot. That's because he's scared that gravity is going to reverse and

he’s going to fall up into the ceiling. When he goes outside, he has to be near trees so, in case the gravity stops, he’ll have something to hold on to. I think he’s about seventeen. Have you talked to him?’

‘No!’

‘He doesn’t talk. I don’t know how much they can do for him.’

The boy looks up at the ceiling fan above the dining room, shudders, and forks food into his mouth. ‘Then there’s my Joy.

My-a Joy’s been here a lot. I’ve been here twenty-four days, and I’ve seen him come and go twice. You seem to like him.’

‘We came in together.’

‘He’s a cool boy. And he has good teeth.’

‘Yeah, I noticed that.’

‘Pearly whites. Not a lot of kids in here have that. I wonder what happened to Ebony’s teeth.’ ‘What’s wrong with them?’ I turn.

‘Don’t look. She has none, you didn’t notice? She’s on a liquid diet. Just gums. I wonder if she sold ‘em, tooth by tooth…’

I bite my tongue. I can’t help it. I shouldn’t be laughing at any of these kids, and neither should Humble, but maybe it’s okay, somewhere, somehow, because we’re enjoying life? I’m not sure. My-a Joy, two tables away, notices my stifled laughter, smiles at me, and laughs himself.

‘I told-jah: it comes to yah!’

‘There we go. What is going on in his mind?’ Humble asks.

I can’t help it. It’s too much. I crack up. Juice and chicken tender bits spray my plate.

‘Oh, I got you now,’ Humble continues. ‘And here comes the guest of honor: Solomon.’

The Hasidic Jewish boy comes in holding up his pants. He still has food in his beard. He grabs his tray and opens a microwaved packet of spaghetti and starts shoveling it into his mouth, making slurping, gulping groans.

‘This boy eats once a day but it’s like his last day on earth,’ Humble says. ‘I think he’s the most far gone of everybody. He’s got like a direct audience with God.’

Solomon looks up, twists his head from side to side, and resumes eating.

Humble drops to a true whisper. ‘He did a few hundred tabs of acid and blew his pupils out. His eyeballs are probably dilated.’

‘No way.’

‘Absolutely. It’s a certain cult of the Hasidics: the Jewish Acid Heads. There’s like a part of their holy writings that tell them it’s the way to talk to God. But he took it too far.’

Solomon gets up, leaves his tray disgustedly at the table, and moves out of the room with alarming speed.

‘He’s like the Mole Boy, back to his hole,’ Humble says. ‘The real Mole Kids are the anorexics; you don’t even see them.’

‘How ~*Sped*~ kids are in here?’ I ask.

‘They say twenty-five,’ Humble says. ‘But that’s not counting the stowaways.’

I look around. Charles / Beth isn’t in the room.

‘Did the, uh, you know, Charles? Did he leave?’ ‘Yeah, the tranny’s gone. I left this afternoon. Tranny hit on you?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Paullie lets him do that. Gets a kick out of it.’

‘I can’t believe he’s just gone. They don’t, like, throw a party for you when you leave?’

‘No way. Kids here don’t want to get out. Getting out means going back to

the streets or jail or to try and fish their things out of an impounded car, like me. Your kind of situation, with the parents and a house: that's rare. And also, with so ~Sped~ kids coming and going, we'd be nuts to try and have a party every time. We'd end up like Fiend One and Fiend Two.'

My tray is a mess from the food spraying out. 'You crack me up, Humble,' I tell him.

'I know. I'm great- times for everybody. Too bad I'm in here instead of onstage getting paid for it.'

'Why don't you try going onstage?'

'I'm old.'

'I have to get some napkins.' I rise and go out to Paullie, who hands me a

stack. I return, wipe off my tray, and start in on the pear.

'You have a secret admirer,' Humble says. 'I should've guessed. I know how you operate.'

'What?'

'She was just here. Look at your chair.'

I get up and check it. There's a piece of paper lying there, face down. I flip it around, and it says HOPE YOU'RE HAVING A GOOD TIMES. VISITING HOURS ARE TOMORROW FROM 7:00-7:05 P.M. I DON'T SMOKE. 'See? Your little girl with the cut-up's face just left it.' Humble gets up. 'I had a feeling. Now you're starting to look like a rival male. I might have to keep my eye on you.'

He deposits his tray and gets in line for his meds. I fold the paper up and put it in the pocket where my phone used to be.

Part: 12

‘Dariez! Hey buddy! Phone!’

I’m sitting with Humble outside the smoking lounge for the 10 P.M. cigarette break, thinking about where I was at the last 10 P.M.: just getting into Mom’s bed. Humble doesn’t smoke, says it’s disgusting, but everyone else in here does, practically, including the black boy who’s afraid of gravity, and the big girl, Becca, both of whom I thought were underage. Armelio, Ebony, Joy, Joy, Joy … no matter how nuts they all seem, they have no problem migrating to the upper left of the Hand sitting down on the couches quietly to wait for their

particular brand of cigarettes, which I learn the hospital does not provide for them-they come in with the packs themselves and the nurses keep them in a special tray. Once they pull a cigarette out of their respective packs, they walk single file through a red door, passing Nurse Monieec, whose job is to light everybody up. When the door closes, the smell drifts out from under it and you hear talking everybody talking all at once, as if they saved their words for a time when there was smoke to send them through.

‘How’re you doing for your first day, Dariez?’ Nurse Monieec asked me five minutes ago, as she closed the door. ‘You don’t smoke, I see.’

‘No.’

‘That’s good. Terrible habit. And it happens so much to kids your age.’

‘A lot of my friends smoke. I just, you know… never liked it.’

‘I see you are adjusting quite well to the floor.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Good, good, that is so important. Tomorrow we’re going to talk more about your adjustment and your situation and how you’re feeling.’

‘Okay.’

‘You got to watch out for this one,’ Humble said. ‘He’s crafty.’

‘Oh yeah?’ Monieec asked.

I was looking for the blond girl, Joy- I had to remember to meet her but she wasn’t around. Neither was Solomon.

Next to Humble was the girl he identified as the Professor, watching us with her bugged-out eyes. Unprompted, Humble started talking with me and Monieec about this old girlfriend of his, who had, in his words, ‘pig-tail nipples, like curly fries, I kid you not.’ Monieec laughed and laughed. The Professor said Humble was disgusting. Monieec said it was okay to laugh once in a while, and did she have a story to share?

‘Yeah, we all know you had some indiscretions in your youth, Professor,’ Humble prodded.

The Professor got a dreamy look in her eyes. I almost thought she was going to have a seizure. And she said, in a light little voice, with a nasal twinge: ‘I had a lot of boys, but I only had one boy.’

I was wondering where I'd heard that before when Armelio interrupted.

'C'mon buddy! The phone is for you!' 'Right.' I get up.

'You're lucky, buddy. It's after ten. They usually shut the phone off at ten.'

Shut the phone off. I picture a big lever in my mind, a boy heaving it down.

'What happens if someone calls and the phone's off?'

'It just rings and rings,' Humble yells out, 'and kids know they're not in Kansas anymore.'

I walk down the hall. The pay-phone receiver is hanging and swaying. I pick it up.

'Hello?'

‘Hey, is this the loony bin?’ It’s Kristopher. It’s Kristopher, high.

‘How’d you get this number?’ I ask. The boy with the beard, who I saw rocking in the dining room when I first came in, is pacing the central hall, staring at me.

‘My girl gave it to me, what do you think? What’s it like in there, dude?’ Kristopher asks.

‘How do you know where I am?’

‘I looked it up, boy! Do you think I’m an idiot? I go to the same school as you! I did a reverse number search and found exactly where you are: UMPC Hospital, Adult Psychiatric! Dude, how’d you get in an adult? Do they serve beer up there?’

‘Kristopher, c’mon.’

‘I’m serious. How about girls? Are there any hot girls around-ow!’

I hear laughing in the background, above rap. ‘Gim-me the phone!’ Richard’s high-pitched bleat comes through the line.

‘Lemme talk!’

Richard comes into focus: ‘Dude, can you get me any Vicodin?’

Howls. Howls of laughter. And in the background, Emmah protesting: ‘Boys, don’t bother him.’

‘Gim-me- Dariez, no, seriously.’ Kristopher is back on. ‘I’m a sorry dude. I… just, how are you, boy?’

‘I’m… okay.’ I’m starting to sweat.

‘What happened?’

‘I didn’t have a good night, and I checked myself into the hospital.’

‘What’s that mean, ‘didn’t have a good night’?’

The boy in my stomach is back, tugging at me. I want to vomit on the phone.

‘I’m depressed, okay, Kristopher?’

‘Yeah, I know, about what?’

‘No, boy, I’m depressed in general. I have like, clinical depression.’

‘No way! You’re like the happiest boy I know!’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘That’s a joke, Dariez. You’re like the craziest person I know. Remember on the bridge? But, you know, the problem is

you don’t chill enough. Like even when you’re here, you’re always worried about school or something; you never just kick back and let things slide, you know what I mean? We’re having a party tonight- where are you going to be?’

‘Kristopher, who’s in the room?’

‘Emmah, Richard, Scruggs, uh... my friend Delilah.’ I don’t even know Delilah.

‘So, all these kids know where I am now.’

‘Dude, we think it’s awesome where you are! We want to visit!’

‘I can’t believe you.’

‘What?’

‘I can’t believe you’re doing this.’

‘Don’t be a girl. You know if I was in the mental ward, you’d call me up and rag on me a little. It’s because we’re friends, boy!’ ‘It’s not a mental ward.’

‘What?’

‘It’s a psychiatric hospital. It’s for short-stay patients. A mental ward is longer.’

‘Well, clearly you’ve been there long enough to be an expert.

How long are you staying?’ ‘Until I have a baseline established.’

‘What does that mean? Wait, I still don’t get it: what was wrong with you in the first place?’

‘I told you, I’m depressed. I take pills for it as your girlfriend.’

‘Like my girlfriend?’

‘Dariez, shut up!’ Emmah yells in the background.

‘My girlfriend doesn’t take any pills,’ Kristopher says.

Richard yells, ‘The only thing she takes is-’ The rest is cut off by laughter and I hear him getting hit with something.

‘Maybe you should talk to her a little more and figure out what she’s actually like,’ I say. ‘You might learn something.’

‘You’re telling me how to treat Emmah now?’ Kristopher asks. I hear him lick his lips. ‘What, like I don’t know what this is really about?’

‘What, Kristopher. What is it really about?’

‘You want my girl, dude. You’ve wanted her for like two years. You’re mad

that you didn't get her, and now you've decided to turn to be mad into being depressed, and now you're off somewhere, probably getting turned into somebody's bitch, trying to play the pity card to get her to end up with you … And I call you as a friend to try and lighten your mood and you hit me with all of this crap? Who do you think you are?'

'Yo, Kristopher.'

'What.'

I'm going to do a trick Richard showed me. He used to do it a long time ago, and I think Kristopher's forgotten it.

'Yo.'

'What?'

'Yo.'

'What?!'

‘Yo, yo, yo, yo, yo-’

I pause. Hold it, hold it…

‘Fuck you.’

And I slam the phone down.

It hits my finger and I go howling into my room, next to Joy.

‘What happened?’ He asks.

‘I don’t have any friends,’ I say, jumping and holding my finger.

‘This is a tough thing to learn.’

I look out the window, through the blinds, into the night. Now I’m screwed. I run my finger under cold water in our bathroom. I didn’t think I could get more screwed than last night, but here I am. I’m in a hospital. I’ve sunk to the lowest place I can be. I’m in a place where I’m not allowed to shave by myself-

even if I needed to shave biologically-because they’re worried that I’ll use the razors on myself. And everyone knows. I’m in a place where kids have no teeth and eat liquid food. And everyone knows. I’m in a place where the boy I eat with lives in his car. And everyone knows.

I can’t function here anymore. I mean in life: I can’t function in this life. I’m no better off than when I was in bed last night, with one difference: when I was in my bed-or my mom's I could do something about it; now that I’m here I can’t do anything. I can’t ride my bike to the Kinzua Bridge; I can’t take a whole bunch of pills and go for a night of good sleep; the only thing I can do is crush my head in the toilet seat, and I still don’t even know if that would work. They take away your options and all you can do is life, and it’s just like Humble said: I’m not

afraid of dying; I'm afraid of living. I was afraid before, but I'm afraid to even more now that I'm a public joke. The teachers are going to hear from the students. They'll think I'm trying to make an excuse for bad work.

I get in bed and put the single top-sheet over me. 'This- freaking sucks.'

'You are depressed?' Joy says.

'Yeah.'

'I, too, suffer from depression.'

I feel the Cycling starting again- I'm going to get out of here at some point and have to go back into my real life. This place isn't real. This is a facsimile of life, for broken kids. I can handle the facsimile, but I can't handle the real thing. I'm going to have to go back to Executive Pre-Professional and deal with

teachers and Kristopher and Emmah because what the hell else do I know? I staked everything on that stupid test. What else am I good at?

Nothing- I'm good at nothing.

I get up and go to the nurses' station.

'I'm not going to be able to sleep.'

'You're not able to sleep?' The nurse is a white-haired little old lady with glasses.

'No, I know I'm not going to be able to sleep,' I respond. 'I'm taking preemptive action.'

'We have a sedative, called Atavan. It's injectable. It'll relax you and make you sleep.'

‘Let’s do it,’ I say, and with Paullie’s supervision, over by the phones, I sit down and have a small needle attached to what looks like a butterfly clip stuck in my arm. I stare forward as something yellow is pumped into me and then I stumble off into my room-stumble because I can feel it hitting me even as I get up from the chair. It’s some kind of powerful muscle relaxant, and loving hands pull me down as I crash into bed past time, but the last thought I have before I go to sleep is:

Great, soldier, now you’re depressed and, in the hospital, and a drug addict. And everyone knows.

Nurse Monieec brings me into the same office that I was interviewed in the day before, to ask me how I’m adjusting. I look at the white walls and

the table where she showed me the pain chart and think that I've come kind of far since yesterday; I've eaten and slept; you can't deny that. Eating and sleeping will do a body good. I needed the shot, though.

'How are we feeling today?' She asks.

'Fine. Well, I couldn't sleep last night. I had to take a shot.'

'I saw on your chart. Why do you think you couldn't sleep?'

'My friends called. They were kind of… making fun of my whole situation.' 'And why would they do that?'

'I don't know.'

'Maybe they are not your friends.' 'Well, I told them… 'Screw you,' basically.

The main one, Kristopher. I told him ‘Screw you.’’

‘Did that make you feel good?’

I sigh. ‘Yeah. There was a girl too.’

‘Who would that be?’

‘Emmah. One of my friends.’

‘And her?’

‘I’m done with her, too.’

‘So, you made a lot of big decisions on your first day here.’

‘Yes.’

‘This happens to boy's kids: they come and make big decisions. Sometimes they are good decisions, sometimes bad.’

‘Well, I hope good, obviously.’

‘Me too. How do you feel about the decisions?’

I picture Emmah and Kristopher dissolving, replaced by Joy and that girl too.

‘It was the right thing to do.’

‘Wonderful. Now, you’ve made some new friends here as well, isn’t that true?’

‘Sure.’

‘I noticed you talking with Humboldt Koper outside the smoking lounge last night.’

‘Is that his real name?’ I laugh. ‘Yeah, well, right, you were talking, too. We all were.’

‘Yes. Now, you might not want to become so friendly with your fellow patients on the floor.’

‘Why not?’

‘That can distract kids from the healing process.’

‘How?’

‘This is a hospital. It’s not a place to make friends. Friends are wonderful, but this place is about you and making you feel better.’

‘But…’ I fidget. ‘I respect Humble. I respect Joy. I have more respect for them after a day and a half than I do for most kids … in the world, really.’ ‘Just be careful of forming close relationships, Dariez.

Focus on yourself.’

‘Okay.’

‘Only then does healing take place?’

‘All right.’

Nurse Monieec leans back with her moon face.

‘As you know, we have certain activities on the floor.’

‘Right.’

‘On your first day, you are excused from activities, but after that, you are expected to attend daily.’

‘Okay.’

‘That means you start today. This is an opportunity for you to explore your interests. So, I ask you: what are your hobbies?’ Bad question, Monieec.

‘I don’t have any.’

‘Aha. None at all?’

‘No.’

I work, Monieec and 1 think about work, and I freak out about work, and I think about how much I think about work, and I freak out about how much I think about work, and I think about how freaked out I get about how much I think about work. Does that count as a hobby?

‘I see.’ She takes some notes. ‘So-o, we can put you in any activity group.’ ‘I guess.’

‘And you’ll go?’

‘Can I play cards with Armelio in the groups?’

‘No.’

‘Will participating in them get me out of here on Thursday?’

‘I cannot say for sure. But not participating will be viewed as a step back in the healing process.’

‘Okay. Sign me up.’

Nurse Monieec marks a sheet in her lap. ‘Your first activity will be arts and crafts this evening, before dinner, with Lacey in the activity lounge, which is through the doors behind the nurses’ station.’

‘I thought those doors didn’t open.’

‘We can open them, Dariez.’

‘When does it start?’

‘Seven.’

‘Oh. I won’t be there exactly at seven.’

‘Why’s- that?’

‘I have to meet with someone at seven.’

‘A visitor?’

‘Sure,’ I lie.

‘A friend?’

‘Well, yeah. So far. I hope so.’

At 6:52 P.M.

I position myself at the end of the hall where I met with my parents yesterday and again today-around three, without Sarah this time; she was at a friend’s house.

Dad didn’t crack any jokes and Mom brought the shirt for Joy, who shook

her hand and told her Your girl is great and she told him she knew that. Dad asked whether we got to watch movies… and I told him that we did, but that since so ~*Sped*~ kids were older, it was boring movies with Cary Grant and Greta Garbo and stuff, and he asked if I wouldn't enjoy him bringing oversaw II on DVD.

And I checked with Howard and it turned out the hospital had a DVD player like everyone else in the world and so Dad and I made a date for Wednesday night, in three days, when he didn't have to work late. He'd come by with Blade II and we'd all watch it.

The place I'm sitting in is the part of the H that mirrors the part next to the smoking lounge; Joy said she didn't smoke, so I think she wants to meet here. I didn't tell my parents about her. I did

tell them that I talked to my friends, that it didn't go well, but that they were probably part of the problem anyway and it was good to stay away from them for a while. Mom said she knew my friends smoked pot and they were probably a bad influence anyway. Dad said Now you haven't smoked pot, right, Dariez? And I told him no, no I hadn't, not before the SATs as he told me. And we all laughed.

They asked how I was eating and I told them I was eating fine, which was true.

They asked how I was sleeping and I told them I was sleeping fine, which I hoped would be true tonight.

Now I sit with my legs crossed, only I think that looks weird, so I uncross them, only now I'm cold and nervous, so I cross them again. Right at 7:00 P.M. Joy,

in the same clothes I saw her in yesterday- dark Capri pants and a white wife-beater- comes down the hall.

She sits in the chair next to me and moves the hair away from her face with small fingers with no nail polish on them.

‘You came,’ she says.

‘Well, yeah, you passed me a note. That’s like the first time a girl passed me a note.’ I smile- I try to sit up and look good in my chair.

‘We’re going to make this quick,’ she says. ‘And it’s going to be a game.’
‘Five minutes, right?’

‘Right- here’s the game: it's just questioned. I ask you a question, and you ask me a question.’

‘Okay. Do you have to answer?’

‘If you want, you can answer. But no matter what, you have to end with another question.’ ‘So- we’re trading questions. Like twenty questions. Why do we have to talk like this?’

‘It’s the best way to get to know a person. And in five minutes we can do way more than twenty questions. If we don’t dilly-dally.

I’m starting. Ready?’

I concentrate. ‘Yeah.’ ‘No, answer with a question. Don’t tell me you’re stupid. Are you stupid?’

‘No!’ I shake my head. ‘Uh … are you ready?’

‘There you go. We’re on. First question: Do you think I’m gross-looking?’

Gosh, she cuts right to the chase. I took her over. I’m a little ashamed of

how I do it because I look at her from the bottom up like I would if she were on the Internet. I look at her feet ending in simple black sneakers and her small ankles and her pale lower legs and the indentation in the Capri pants where the pants start, under her knee, and up her body to her small waist and then the sharp bulge of her breasts and then her neck, coming through the uneven, distended neckline of her wife-beater, and her small chin and lips. The cuts on her face line her cheeks and forehead: little parallel slashes, three together in each place, with clumps of white skin on the ends where they're healing. They don't look like very deep cuts, and they're thin-I have a feeling that when they heal up, she'll look just fine. And she's beautiful. No question. Her eyes are green and knowing.

‘No, you look awesome,’ I say.

‘What’s your question?’

‘Uh, why did you pass me the note?’

‘I thought you were interesting. Why did you do what it said?’

‘I…’ I can’t think up a fake answer quickly enough. ‘I’m a straight boy, you know. So- if a girl talks to me or whatever, I’ll do exactly what she says.’ Wait, now: make it a compliment.

‘Especially if it’s a pretty girl.’ I smile.

‘You’re not very good at this game. What’s your question?’

‘Oh- Right. Ah… are you straight?’

She sighs. ‘Yes. Don’t get too excited. You don’t have a boner, do you?’

‘No! ‘I cross my legs. ‘No. So… how’d you get here?’

‘Oh, that’s a big one. Crossing the line. What do you think?’

‘Someone came in on you while you were cutting your face?’

‘Ding- ding- ding! Afterward, actually. I was bleeding all over the sink. How’d you get here?’

‘I checked myself in. When did you get here?’

‘Why did you check yourself in? Twenty-one days ago. Whoops. Reverse those. Pretend I ended with the question.’ She rubs her arms.

‘I wasn’t doing well. I called, you know, the Suicide Hotline, and they told me to come here. Why have you been here so long?’

‘They’re not sure I won’t hurt me again. What medication are you on?’
‘Zoloft. What about you?’

‘Paxil- where do you live?’

‘Around here... Where do you live?’

‘Knox- what do your parents do?’

‘My mom designs greeting cards and my dad works in health insurance. What about you?’

‘My mom’s a lawyer and my dad’s dead. Do you want to know how he died?’

‘I’m sorry. How? Do I want to know?’

‘That’s two questions. Yes, you do. He died fishing. He fell off a boat. Isn’t that the stupidest thing you ever heard?’

‘No. Not by a long shot’ I say. ‘You want to know what I think is the stupidest way to die?’

‘What?’

‘Auto-erotic asphyxiation. You know what that is?’

‘When kids put ropes around themselves while they’re jerking off, right?’

‘Right- I read about it in the DSM. Have you ever read the DSM?’

‘The big book of psych disorders?’

‘Yeah!’

‘Of course. Have you ever heard of Undine's Curse?’

‘Oh my God! I thought I was the only one who knew about that. Where you forget how to breathe. Uh… where did you first see the DSM?’

‘On my shrink’s bookshelf- You?’

‘Same. You call them ‘shrinks’ too?’

‘That’s what they are, right?’

‘What does that even mean?’

‘I think ‘head shrinks,’ because they shrink kids' heads. You think I have all the answers?’

I stop. I need a break. I put my hands on my knees and rock forward. This game is hard. ‘Is your name Joy?’

‘Why wouldn’t it be?’

‘After the whole thing at lunch yesterday, I don’t know what to believe. Do you know what my name is?’ ‘Of course. Dariez Gilner.

You think I’m an idiot?’

‘How’d you know my last name?’

‘I read your bracelet. You want to read mine?’

‘‘Joy Hinton.’ Hey…’ I think, ‘So here’s one: Did you know what was going to happen at lunch yesterday?’

‘With ‘Beth’? Of course. He does that to everybody.

What I’m curious about is this: why’d you come over?’ ‘I thought she-uh, he was, Ya know, a girl. And I got asked-’

‘Why did you come here?’’

‘Wait, I forgot to ask you a question.’

‘That’s okay. You have one point. Why’d you come here?’

‘Um, I thought I said: because you’re a girl. And you asked me. And you seem cool?’ You already said she’s beautiful; now show you’re not shallow and say she’s cool.

‘Watching you try and answer these questions right is hilarious. You’re a silly boy. You know you’re silly, right?’

Joy leans back and stretches. Her hair falls away from her face and her cuts scream up into the light. The lines of her wifebeater echo her hair.

‘You know those cuts on your face aren’t that bad?’

‘How long have I been here, Dariez?’

‘You told me twenty-one days. Is that true?’

‘Yeah. Can you imagine what they looked like when I came in?’

‘Are they going to scar?’

‘I have to have surgery to clear them up. You think I should?’

‘No. Why hide what you’ve been through?’

‘I don’t know if that’s a question. It’s too obvious. Wouldn’t I be happier without scars?’ ‘I don’t know. It’s tough to tell what would make you happy. I thought I’d be happier in a really tough high school, and I ended up here. Wait, where do you go to school?’

‘Delfin.’ That’s a private school in Knox; I think it’s the last one where they have to wear uniforms. ‘You?’

‘Executive Pre-Professional. Do you have to wear uniforms?’

‘Are you like a school-uniform pervert?’

‘No. Well… no.’

‘Two points. You didn’t ask a question. Do you like this game?’

‘I like talking to you. It’s like a math problem. Do you like talking to me?’

‘It’s all right. Do you like math?’

‘I thought I was good at it, but it turns out I’m a year behind everybody else. You?’

‘I’m bad at school. I spend most of my time in ballet. But I’m not tall

enough for that. Have you ever been not tall enough for anything?'

'Maybe some rides, when I was a little kid. Why?'

'I'm still too short for those rides. It sucks to be short.

Remember that.' She stops.

'One point for you.'

'That's three for you. Game over.'

'Okay, cool.' I sit back in my seat. 'Phew. What now?'

'That's a good question. I have no idea. I've got to go to arts and crafts.'

'Me too.'

'You want to go together?'

‘Sure.’ I stop. That’s a come-on, isn’t it? ‘Can we… uh… can I like- kiss you or whatever?’

Joy leans back and laughs and laughs. ‘No, you can’t kiss me!

What, you think we play the game once and you get to kiss me?’ ‘Well, I thought we had a thing going.’

‘Dariez.’ She leans in and looks me right in the eyes. ‘No.’ She smiles. The cuts crinkle.

‘Do you know when you’re leaving?’ I ask.

‘Thursday.’

My heart jumps. ‘Me too.’ I start to lean forward- ‘No. No, Dariez. Arts and crafts.’

‘Okay.’ I get up. I hold out my hand for Joy. She ignores it.

‘Race you!’ she says, and sprints down the hall into the activity lounge, with me following, trying to keep up- how can I not, when my legs are so much longer? Does ballet teach you to run? Howard yells at us as we pass the nurses’ station-’Kids! Kids!

No running on the floor!’-but I don’t care.

‘So- who here likes to draw-aww-w?’ Lacey asks. Lacey is a big smiling lady with lots of makeup and bracelets. She rules the activity lounge, which is exactly like the art room I had when I was in kindergarten. There are patient-contributed paintings of hamburgers and dogs…

…And kites on the walls and then there are posters- OBSTACLES ARE THOSE FRIGHTENING THINGS THAT APPEAR WHEN WE TAKE OUR MIND OFF OUR GOALS; DREAMS ARE ONLY DREAMS UNTIL YOU WAKE UP AND MAKE THEM REAL; THINGS I HAVE TO DO TODAY: 1) BREATHE IN 2) BREATHE OUT.

The alphabet, thankfully, is nowhere to be seen; if I saw Aa Bb, I'd probably start the Cycling again. There is one interesting poster: KIDS WITH MENTAL ILLNESS CONTRIBUTE TO OUR WORLD. It lists- Abraham Lincoln, Ernest Hemingway, Winston Churchill, Isaac Newton, Sylvia Plath, and a bunch of other smart kids who were kind of nuts.

It's depressing, though. I mean, this room is what I expect a mental

hospital to look like. Adults are reduced to children, sitting with finger paints; a jolly supervisor telling them that everything they do is great. But isn't this what I was asking for when I was filling out my menus?

Part: 13

You wanted preschool, soldier, you got to preschool.

I wanted the comfort of preschool, not the ambiance.

You got to take the good with the bad. Like your little chick here. I bet you didn't think you'd come in here and find a fine filly like that.

Well, she's not a filly.

I have a feeling filly means girlfriend. I look at Joy.

We're trying to decide where to sit. I only talked with her once.

She likes you, boy, and if you can't tell that, you aren't going to be able to tell a rifle from a cap gun in this war.

What war is that, again?

The one you're fighting with your head. Right, how are we doing?

You're making gains, soldier, can't you see that? Joy and I sit with Humble and the Professor. 'I see you two have made each other's acquaintance,' Humble says.

'Leave them alone,' the Professor says.

'Where were you?' Humble continues. 'Were you in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G?'

‘No.’

‘Nothing’s happening,’ Joy says.

‘We’re just sitting together,’ I say. ‘‘Dariez and Noelle, sitting in a tree-’’ He gets up and puts his hands on his hips, sashaying.

‘Hold on, now, what’s going on here?’ Lacey comes over. ‘Is there a problem, Mr. Koper?’

‘No- What? What are you talking about?’ He holds up his hands, sits down. ‘You mean me?’

Lacey scoffs and announces: ‘This is free-period arts recreational therapy, for all you latecomers!’ Humble points at me and Joy, making a little shame on your gesture. ‘That means you can draw whatever you feel like. It’s a great chance to explore your creativity and find out

what you like to do for leisure! Leisure is very important!'

Lacey comes up behind me when she's done announcing:

'You're new. Hi, my name is Lacey. I'm the recreation director.'

'Dariez,' I shake her hand.

'You want a pencil and paper, Dariez?'

'No. I don't have anything to do. I can't draw.' 'Sure, you can. It doesn't have to be representative. You can do the abstract. Do you want crayons?'

'No.' God, it's so embarrassing. Being asked if you want crayons.

'How about paints?'

'I told you, I can't draw.'

‘Paints are for painting, not drawing.’

‘Well, I can’t do that either.’

‘What about markers?’

‘No.’

‘Everyone?’ Lacey turns to the room. ‘Our new guest, Dariez, has what we call an artistic block. He doesn’t have anything to draw!’

‘That’s too bad, buddy!’ Armelio yells from his table. ‘You want to play cards?’

‘Armelio, no cards in here. Now, can anyone give Dariez something he can draw?’

‘Fish!’ Joy yells out. ‘Fish are easy.’

‘Pills,’ Joy says.

‘Joy,’ Lacey admonishes. ‘We do not draw pills.’ ‘Salad,’ says Ebony.

‘She wants you to draw it, but she sure as hell can’t eat it,’ Humble guffaws.

‘Mister Koper! That’s it. Please leave the room.’ ‘Oh-h,’ everybody says.

‘That’s right!’ Ebony calls. She makes the umpire gesture. ‘You’re out of here!’ ‘Fine,’ Humble stands up. ‘Whatever. Blame me. Blame the boy who has total respect for everybody else.’ He gathers his things, which is nothing, and steps out of the activity lounge. ‘You’re all a bunch of yuppies!’

I watch him go.

‘You can draw a cat!’ the boy who’s afraid of gravity says. ‘I used to have one. It died.’

‘Rolling pin,’ the bearded boy says. It’s the first words I’ve heard him say since I saw him in the dining room on my way in. He still rocks, and he still paces the halls whenever he isn’t shuttled into a room.

‘What was that, Robert?’ Lacey asks. ‘That’s very good.

What did you say?’

But he clams up. He won’t say it again. Rolling pin. I wonder what that means to him. If I had one thing to say, I don’t think it would be a rolling pin. It would probably be sex.

Or shift…

‘He can draw something from his childhood,’ Joy says next to me.

‘Oh, there’s a good one. Joy, you want to speak up?’

She sighs, then announces to the room: ‘Dariez can draw something from his childhood.’

‘That’s right,’ Lacey nods. ‘Dariez, do you like any of these suggestions?’

But I’m already gone. I’ve got the river started at the top of the page, looking down to meet with a second river. No, wait, you have to put in the roads first, because the bridges go over the water, remember? Highways first, then rivers, the streets. It’s all coming back to me. How long has it been since I did this? Since I was nine? How could I forget? I slash a highway across the center of the page and make it meet with another in a beautiful spaghetti interchange. One ramp goes off the junction through a park and ends in a circle, a nice hubbub of

residential activity. The blocks start from there. The map is forming.

My city…

‘Oh, somebody got Dariez’s mind unblocked!’ Lacey announces from the other end of the room. I glance back. Ebony, who’s been sitting over there, goes through the arduous process of getting up with her cane and walks toward me. ‘I want to see.’

‘Huh, thanks Ebony,’ I say, turning back to the map. She looks over my shoulder. ‘Oo-oh that’s pretty,’ she says.

‘What is it?’ Armelio yells.

‘Let’s not yell across the room,’ Lacey says.

‘That is extraordinary,’ the Professor says next to me.

‘I deserve half-credit,’ says Joy, sketching out a flower to my right. She glances at me through the sides of her eyes. ‘You know I do.’

‘You do,’ I tell her, taking a break to look at her. I go back to the map. It’s flowing out of me. ‘Is that somebody’s brain?’ Ebony asks.

I look up at her, rolling her mouth and smiling down. I look at the map. It’s not a brain, clearly; it’s a map; can’t she see the rivers and highways and interchanges? But I see how it could look like a brain, like if all roads were twisted neurons, pulling your emotions from one place to another, bringing the city to life. A working brain is probably a lot like a map, where anybody can get from one place to another on the freeways. It’s the nonworking brains that get blocked, that

have dead ends, that are under construction like mine.

'Yeah,' I say, nodding up at her. 'Yeah. That's exactly what it is. It's a brain.' And I stop my map in the middle-this was always a problem for me, finishing the damn things; I always ran out of energy before I got to the edge of the page and draw ahead around it. I put a nose and two paired indentations for lips and a neck running down. I draw the head so that right where the brain would be is this blob of city street map. I make a traffic circle the eye and bring down boulevards to lead to the mouth, and Ebony giggles above me taps her cane.

'It's so pretty!'

'It's all right,' I say, looking down. I decide it's done. I can do better. I put my initials in the bottom-CG like

‘computer-generated’-and put the picture aside. I ask for more paper and start the next one.

It’s easy- It’s easy and pretty and I can do it. I can make these things forever. For the rest of the arts and crafts, I make five.

I get so concentrated that I don’t even notice when

Joy leaves. I only find her note, sitting next to me, decorated with a flower, as I gather up my things from the room.

IM TAKING A BREAK FROM YOU. CAN’T GET TOO ATTACHED. THE NEXT MEETING WILL BE TUESDAY, SAME TIMES AND PLACE. DON’T BE WORRIED THAT IT’S SUCH A LONG WAIT. I THINK YOU’RE LOVELY.

I fold the note and put it in my pocket next to the other one. After arts and crafts is dinner, where Humble tells me he forgives me for getting him in trouble, and I thank him, and after dinner is cards with Armelio, who tells me that now that I've gotten a little experience under my belt, I might be ready for the big card tournament they're having tomorrow night.

'Do you play with real money?' I ask.

'Nope, buddy! We play with buttons!'

I hang outside the lounge during cigarette break-I just follow the group; wherever they go, I go and talk with Joy about my day. Then I go into my room with my map/brain art. My bed hasn't been made during the day they don't

pamper you in Six North-but the pillow has returned to its normal shape, no longer dented in by my sweaty head, and when I lie down it lets out the air in the slowest, soothing hiss I've ever heard.

'You are feeling better?' Joy asks.

'Quite a bit,' I say. 'You've got to get out of the room more, Joy. There's a whole world out there.' 'I pray every day that someday I will get better like you.'

'I'm not that much better, boy.'

But I'm good enough to sleep. No shot necessary.

The next day is Monday and I should be at school.

I shouldn't be eating with Humble and hearing about what his girlfriend used to do to him everyday time- they passed a Burger King. I should be at

school. I shouldn't be explaining to Ebony's friend on the phone that what I drew was a map of her brain and having her echo 'He's so good, Marlene, she's so good.' I should be at school.

I shouldn't be taking my Zoloft in line behind Joy, who is dressed in my shirt for his interview. I should be at school.

I work up the courage to get to the phones at 11 A.M.

and check the messages. 'Hey, Dariez, it's Kristopher, listen, I'm sorry, boy.

The truth is, I probably-well, I got into a big fight with Emmah after you told me she was on pills and... I think I might have some of that depression stuff, too. Lately, I've been like, unable to get out of bed some times and I'm just... yah' know,

really sleepy and I lose my train of thought. So- like, I probably called you the other night like that because I was projecting, that's what Emmah says, and I'm seriously interested in visiting you. I and Emmah are having problems.'

I call him back and leave a message for him. I tell him that if he feels depressed, he should go to his general physician first and get a referral to psychopharmacology and go through the process as I did. I tell him that it's nothing to be ashamed of. I tell him I'm glad he called but I don't know whether he should visit because I'm sorting my stuff out here and I think I'd like to keep in here and the outside world as separate as possible. And I ask him what's going on between him and Emmah, whether they made up yet.

‘Hello, Dariez, this is Mr. Reynolds again-’

I call him back and leave a message that I’m in the hospital for personal reasons and that he’ll have his labs when I’m good and ready to do them. I tell him that I’ll provide any documentation from doctors-including psych pharmacologists, psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses, recreation directors, and President Armelio- that I am being cared for right now in a facility where the stresses of doing labs are not allowed. And I tell him that if he wants to talk to me again, he can call the number here, and don’t be alarmed if someone answers, ‘Jack’s Pub.’

‘Hey, Dariez, this is Jenna, I’m one of Emmah’s friends, and like … okay, this is embarrassing, but do you want to

hang out time- soon? I heard about all this stuff you went through like you're in the hospital or whatever, and my last boyfriend was insensitive about that stuff because I kind of go through that stuff too? And so I thought you'd probably understand me, and I always thought you were cute-we met each other a couple… but I always thought that you were so shy that you wouldn't be fun to hang out with; I didn't realize you were like, depressed.'

-And-

'I think that's brave of you to admit it and I just think we should hang out.'

Well. I call Jenna back and leave her a message that I can hang out with her next week maybe.

That’s it- the other messages are from Richard and Scruggs and they’re about pot and I ignore them. I put the phone down without slamming it on my finger.

Joy is right in front of me.

‘I follow your advice. Come out of the room.’

‘Hey, good morning! How are you?’

He shrugs. ‘Okay. What is to do?’

‘There’s lots of stuff to do. Do you like to draw?’

‘Eh.’

‘Do you like to play cards?’

‘Eh.’

‘Do you like to... listen to music?’

‘Yes.’ ‘Great! Okay-’

‘Only Italy music.’

‘Huh.’ I try to think of where I can get Italian music, or even what it’s called when suddenly Solomon flops past in his sandals.

‘Excuse me if you please, I am trying to rest!’ he yells at us. Joy takes one look at him and curls his face into a laugh, his glasses rising above his nose.

‘What is the problem?’ Solomon asks.

‘Seventeen days!’ Joy says. ‘Seventeen days the Jew will not talk to me! And now he does. I am honored.’

‘I wasn’t talking to you, I was talking to him,’ Solomon points at me.

‘Have you boys met?’ I ask.

Joy and Solomon shake hands- Solomon's pants fall a little but he bows his legs to hold them up. Then he takes his hand back and stalks off. Joy turns to me: 'This I think is enough for one day.' And he goes back into our room.

I shake my head.

The phone rings next to me. I call for Armelio. He scoots up, grabs the receiver, says 'Jack's Pub,' and hands the phone to me.

'Me?'

'Yeah, buddy.'

I take the phone. 'I'm looking for Dariez Gilner,' an authoritative voice says through the line.

'Ah, speaking. Who is this?'

‘This is Mr. Alfred Janowitz, Dariez. I’m your principal at

Executive Pre-Professional High?’

‘Holy crap!’ I say, and I hang up.

The phone starts ringing again. I stand by it and ignore it, explaining to Armelio and everyone else who passes that it’s for me but that I can’t answer. They understand completely. It’s the principal. I was right. I’ve seen this boy before; he’s the one who greeted us on that first day when I was high with Kristopher and told us that only the best had been accepted and only the best would be rewarded. He’s the one who drops by classes and looks us over as we take tests and gives out chocolates as if that makes up for it. He’s the one who says ‘your school day shouldn’t end until five o’clock’ and is always in the

newspapers as the most no-nonsense principal around and now he's on my ass because he knows I'm crazy and knows I haven't been doing my homework. I should never have left that message for Mr. Reynolds. This is it. I'm being expelled. I'm out of school. I'm never going to go to high school again. I'm never going to go to college.

When the phone finally dies, I start pacing.

I was right all along. What was I thinking? You add up your little victories in here and think they count for something. You get lulled into thinking Six North is the real world. You make friends and have a pithy little conversation with a girl, and you think you've succeeded, Dariez? You haven't succeeded in the slightest. You haven't

won anything. You haven't proven anything. You haven't gotten better. You haven't gotten a job. You aren't making any money. You're in here costing the state money, taking the same pills you took before. You're wasting your parents' money and the taxpayers' money. You don't have anything wrong with you.

This was all an excuse, I think. I was doing fine. I had a 93 average and I was holding my head above water. I had good friends and a loving family. And because I needed to be the center of attention, because I needed something more, I ended up here, wallowing in myself, trying to convince everybody around me that I have some kind of... disease.

I don't have any disease. I keep pacing. Depression isn't a disease. It's a

pretext for being a prima donna. Everybody knows that. My friends know it; my principal knows it. The sweating has started again. I can feel the cycling roaring up in my brain. I haven't done anything right. What have I done, made a bunch of little pictures? That doesn't count as anything. I'm finished. My principal just called me and I hung up on him and didn't call back.

I'm finished. I'm expelled. I'm finished.

The boy is back in my stomach and I rush to my bathroom, but something about me won't let it go. I hunch over the toilet moaning and hacking, but it won't come so I wash my mouth out and get into bed.

'What happened?' Joy asks. 'You never sleep during the day.'

‘I’m in big trouble,’ I say, and I lie there, getting up only to munch through lunch until Dr. Ross comes by at three o’clock and pokes her head into my room.

‘Dariez? I’m here to talk.’

‘I’m really glad to see you.’ We’re back in the room that Nurse Monieec checks me out in. Dr. Ross seems very familiar with it.

‘I’m glad to see you, too. I’m glad to see you well,’ she says.

‘Yeah, it’s been a roller coaster, I have to say.’

‘An emotional roller coaster.’

‘Yes.’

‘Where is that roller coaster right now, Dariez?’

‘Down. Way down.’

‘What’s got you down?’

‘I got a phone call from my school principal.’

‘And what did he want?’

‘I don’t know. I hung up.’

‘What do you think he wanted, Dariez?’

‘To expel me.’

‘And why would he want to do that?’

‘Hello? Because I’m here? Because I’m not in school?’ ‘Dariez, your principal can’t expel you for being in a psychiatric hospital.’

‘Well, you know all my other problems.’

‘What are those?’

‘Hanging out with my friends all the time-, getting depressed, not doing homework …’

‘Uh-huh. Let’s hold off on that for a moment, Dariez. I haven’t seen you since Friday. Can you talk a little bit about how you came to be here?’

I give her the rap. There’s much more to add to it now, about being on Six North. About Joy and the eating and the not throwing up and the sleeping, where I’m one for two.

‘What’s it like compared to Friday, Dariez?’

‘Better. Much, much better. But the question is, am I better, or am I just lulled into a false sense of security by this fake environment? I mean, it’s not normal here.’

‘Nowhere is normal, Dariez.’

‘I guess not. What’s been the news since I’ve been in here?’

‘Someone tried to gas the Four Seasons in Knox.’ ‘Jeez!’

‘I know.’ Dr. Ross smirks. Then she leans in. ‘Dariez, there’s one thing you didn’t mention that your recreation director did. She said you’ve been doing art while you’ve been here.’

‘Oh, yeah, that’s nothing. Just yesterday.’

‘What is it like?’

‘Well, remember how I told you last time the joy- that I liked to draw maps when I was a little kid? It sort of came from that.’

‘How so?’

‘When they gave me a pencil and paper in arts and crafts, I remembered- well, I didn’t remember, I was prompted by Joy-’

‘That’s the girl you met?’

‘Right.’

‘From the way you describe her I can see a real friendship developing.’

‘Oh, forget a friendship. We are going to be going out when I leave, I think.’

‘You think you’re ready for that, Dariez?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘All right.’ She takes a note. ‘So how did Joy help you?’

‘She suggested that I draw something from my childhood, and that made me remember the maps.’

‘I see.’

‘And I started drawing one, but then Ebony came over-’

‘You’re on a first-name basis with all these kids.’

‘Of course.’

‘Have you ever considered yourself good at making friends,

Dariez?’

‘No!’

‘But you can make friends here.’

‘Right… Well, here is different.’

‘How is it different?’

‘It’s, I don’t know… there’s no pressure.’

‘No pressure to make friends?’

‘No, no pressure to work hard.’

‘As there is in the outside world.’

‘Right.’

‘Tremendous pressure out there. Your Tentacles.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Are there Tentacles in here, Dariez?’

I stop and think. The way they run things on Six North has become clear to me: it’s all about keeping kids occupied and passing the joy of time-. You wake up and you’ve immediately got a blood pressure gauge around your arm and somebody taking your pulse. Then it’s

breakfast. Then you get your meds and then there's a smoking break, and then maybe you have fifteen minutes to yourself before there's some kind of activity. That leads to lunch which leads to more meds and more smoking and more activities, and then all of a sudden, the day is over; its TIME- for dinner, and everyone's trading salt and desserts, and then it's the 10 P.M. cigarette break and bed-time-.

'No, there aren't any Tentacles in here,' I say. 'The opposite of a Tentacle is a simple task, something that's placed before you and that you do without question.

That's what they have in here.'

'Right. Your only Tentacles in here are your phone calls, which are what got you so down just now.'

‘Correct.’

Dr. Ross takes notes. ‘Now, here’s an important question,

Dariez. Are there any Anchors in here?’

‘Huh.’

‘Anything you can hold on to.’

I think about it. If an Anchor is a constant, there are lots of those. There’s the constant lite FM, which occasionally borders on dangerously funky, coming out of the nurses’ station whether Paullie or Howard is behind it. There’s the constant schedule: the food coming and going, the meds being dished out, the announcements of Armelio. There’s the constant of Armelio himself, always ready to play cards. And My-a Joy is always around going, ‘It’ll come to Ya!’

‘The kids are Anchors,’ I say.

‘Kids don’t make good Anchors, though, Dariez. They change. The kids here are going to change. The patients are going to leave. You can’t rely on them.’

‘When will they leave?’

‘I can’t know that.’

‘What about the staff?’

‘They change too, just on a different Joy- scale. Kids always come and go.’

‘Joy. She’s beautiful and smart and I like her. She could be an Anchor.’

‘You don’t want any of your Anchors being members of the opposite sex you’re attracted to,’ Dr. Ross says. ‘Relationships change even more than

kids. It’s like two kids changing. It’s exponentially more volatile. Especially two teenagers.’

‘But Romeo and Juliet were teenagers,’ I point out.

‘And what happened to Romeo and Juliet?’

‘Oh,’ I mumble. ‘Right.’

‘And have we gone beyond that, Dariez? Have we gone beyond thinking those thoughts?’ ‘Yes,’ I nod.

‘Because if you have those thoughts again you know you have to come back here.’

‘I know. I won’t.’

‘Why not?’

‘It’s just… It would suck to kill myself. I’d hurt a lot of kids and

…It would suck.’

‘That’s right,’ Dr. Ross leans across the table. ‘It would suck. And not just for other kids. For you.’ ‘It’s not noble or anything,’ I say. ‘Like this boy Joy who’s my roommate, he’s practically dead. He doesn’t do anything. He just lies in bed all day.’

‘Right.’

‘And I don’t want to ever be like him. I don’t want to live that way. And if I were dead, I’d be living that way.’

‘Excellent, Dariez.’

She stops. Like I say, the good shrinks know when to throw in a dramatic pause.

I tap my feet. The fluorescent lights hum.

‘I want to pick back up on your Anchors,’ Dr. Ross says. ‘Can you think of anything else you’ve found in here that could occupy your time- when you leave?’ I think. I know there’s something. It’s at the tip of my brain-tongue. But it won’t come.

‘No.’

‘Okay, not a problem. You’ve made a lot of progress today.

There’s only one more thing we have to do: call your principal.’

‘No!’ I tell her, but she’s, pulling out her cell phone, which is allowed up here. ‘Yes, I’d like the number for Executive Pre-Professional High School in Knox.’

‘You can’t you can’t you can’t’ I say, leaning across the table, grabbing at

the phone. Luckily the blinds are drawn so no one can see in here; if they did, they'd probably have me sedated. She gets up and walks to the door, points outside. Do I want security in here? I sit back down.

'Yes,' she says. 'I need to speak with the principal. I'm returning a call of his to one of your students regarding a health and legal matter. I'm the mother.' A pause.

'Great.' She cups the phone. 'I'm being connected.' 'I can't believe you're doing this,' I say.

'I can't believe you'd be worried about me doing this... yes, hello? Is this Mr...' she looks at me.

'Janowitz,' I mouth.

'Janowitz?'

I hear an affirmative mumph through the line. ‘I’m Dr. Ross, calling for your student Dariez Gilner. You called him before at UMPC Hospital psychiatric facility in Knox. I’m Dariez’s licensed therapist and I’m right here with him; would you like to speak with him?’

She nods. ‘Here you go, Dariez.’

I take the cell phone-it’s smaller than mine, buzzier. ‘Um, hello?’

‘Dariez, why’d you hang up on me?’ His booming voice is light and gentle, almost laughing.

‘Ah… I thought I was in trouble. I thought I was being expelled. You called me, you know, in the hospital.’

‘Dariez, I called you because I got a message from one of our teachers. I just wanted to tell you that you have the

school's full support in everything you're going through and that we're more than willing to have your semester repeated, or given over the summer, or for work to be provided for you where you are now if you should miss enough days to warrant that.'

'Oh.'

'We don't pass judgment on our students for being in the hospital, my goodness, Dariez.'

'No? But it's, like, a psychiatric-'

'I know what kind of hospital it is. Do you think we don't have other kids in these situations? It's a very common problem among young kids.'

'Oh. Uh, thanks.'

'Are you doing okay?'

'I'm doing better.'

‘Do you know when you’ll be leaving?’

I don’t want to tell him Thursday and then have it be Friday.

Or next Thursday. Or next year.

‘Soon,’ I say.

‘Okay. You just hang in there, and whenever you come back, we’ll be waiting for you at Executive Pre-Professional.’ ‘Thanks, Mr. Janowitz.’ And I picture it in my mind: me going back to school. My little group of friends- only they’re not even my friends anymore offered by this new collection of girls who like me because I’m depressed and teachers who are sympathizing and the suddenly nice principal. It’s something I want to get excited about. But I can’t.

‘See, was that so bad?’ Dr. Ross asks. And I have to admit that it wasn’t. But it was kind of like getting told that the prison is happy that you’ve been granted a reprieve but we’ll be right here with open arms to take you in when you come back.

‘The plan right now is to discharge you Thursday, Dariez, and I’ll be here to talk to you on Wednesday, all right?’ Dr. Ross asks. I shake her hand and thank her. I tell her what I tell her when I feel really good about talking to her, which is that she knows how to do her job. Then I go back to my room and draw some brain maps.

I’m excited for tonight, for Armelio’s big card tournament.

‘Okay!’ says Armelio. ‘Everybody here?’

We're back in the activities lounge. Joy, Humble, Ebony, and the Professor are here. Everyone shaved today-it turns out that the shaving rule is only enforced on weekdays- and they look ten times-s better. Even Rolling Pin Robert, pacing the halls outside, looks serviceable. I'll have to remember that: shaving can make even a psych patient look good.

'Huh.' Joy exhales. 'Joy's still in his interview.' 'Yeah,' Ebony says. 'Dariez lent him a shirt. You're so nice, Dariez.'

'Thanks.'

'When are you going to do more of your art?'

'Maybe tonight, after cards.'

'That's right, buddy, cards are what we need to focus on,' Armelio

announces. He stands at the head of the table, which is covered with paint drops, crayon marks, and ink smears over uneven wood. In the middle is a plastic container with the buttons, separated into four even partitions. It looks like at some point the buttons were ordered by size or color, but now they're all mixed up every conceivable hue, shape, and ornamentation.

They look like jewels.

'I don't want any of my buttons missing at the end!' Lacey says from the back. She's at the other table, reading a Roboyce novel and supervising.

'That's right, we're still looking for the Blue Button Bandit,' Humble says. 'Anybody who can suddenly keep their pants up, we're going to be very

suspicious. Watch out for Solomon, that means. And Ebony.'

'I told you once, stupid, to stop talking about my pants.' 'Okay, everybody ready?' Armelio asks. 'Take your buttons!'

Our hands dive into the middle of the table, grabbing fistfuls. We pour the buttons in front of us and use our fingertips to spread them into a one-button-thick layer. Armelio gets to judge whether we have an equal amount.

'Humble put back six buttons. Ebony, put back ten. Joy, what's going on, buddy? You have like two hundred buttons too ~*Sped*~!'

'I got a button bonus,' Joy says, and just then Joy comes into the activity room.

He moves with his normal loping gait, leaning back with my shirt on. He stops at the end of our table, makes sure he has our attention, raises his right hand, shakes it in the air like he's doing a magic trick, and then slams both his fists down on the table so his arms make a 'V-shape,' as if he were Chairboy of the Board. He grins:

'I got it.'

Silence holds the room.

Lacey starts the clapping from the back, slowly, but with reverence and purpose. Then Armelio joins in and the tempo starts to spiral.

'All right!'

'Congratulations!'

'Hooray for Knox scumbags!'

‘Joy-by! Joy-by!’

In a small room, eight kids clapping can be a lot. The posters seem to shake with the applause. As it gets louder there’s howling and hooting and cheering. Tommy gets up and gives Joy a bear hug, the kind that you can see between two men who’ve known one another for twenty years, who’ve been Fiend One and Fiend Two, for whom one’s victory counts just as much for the other.

‘Joy, buddy, you the boy!’ Armelio walks over to the hugging pair and smacks Joy’s back, nearly toppling over me.

‘Wait a minute,’ Joy says. He extracts himself from the hug and holds up his right hand. ‘Before we get too crazy, ‘because, I see the buttons are out, I got to thank this young boy over here.’

He walks toward me. ‘This kid gave me the shirt off his back this blue one right here and he didn’t know me from Adam, and there isn't no question, without him, I wouldn’t have gotten this home. This new home.’

I stand up and Joy hugs me, his big bony hands wrapping around my back, and I feel the smooth old skin of his cheek and the well-knit fabric of my shirt doing a better job on him than it ever did on me. I think about how much this means to this boy; about how much more important it is than going to any high school or getting with any girl or being friends with anybody. This boy just got a place to live. Me? I have one. I’ll always have one. I don’t have any reason to worry about it. My stupid fantasies about ending up homeless are just that- the fact is that my parents will take me in time-,

anywhere. But some kids have to get lucky just to live. And I never knew I could make anybody lucky.

If Joy can get a place to live, I think, then I can get a life worth living.

‘Thank you, kid,’ Joy says.

‘It’s nothing,’ I mumble. ‘Thanks for the tour.’ ‘All right, boys, we going to play cards or what?’ Armelio asks, but Joy stops him.

‘One more thing: I’m sorry, Dariez, but I accidentally fell in something on my way back from the interview.’ He turns around. There’s a… wait a minute…

There’s a giant piece of dog shit ground into the back of my shirt, right above his belt.

‘Ah…’ I can’t believe I didn’t smell it. Did I touch it when I hugged him? ‘Ah, Joy… it’s okay… my mom can wash it out-’

‘It isn't real!’ Joy reaches back and pulls it off, throws it at me. It bounces off my shirt (a tie-dye T-shirt that everyone on Six North likes) and lands on the table in the buttons.

‘It’s plastic! I’ve had it since the eighties! Ha! I love it!’

Armelio cracks up. ‘Holy crap! Look at that! It looks like something my mom would leave in my bedroom!’ Everyone stops, turns.

‘President Armelio, we did not need to know that,’ says Humble.

‘Your mother would defecate in your bedroom?’ The Professor asks.

‘Who said that?’ Armelio asks. ‘I was talking about plastic what’s the matter with you?’

‘Everybody just cools it a little,’ says Lacey, standing up with her book at her side. ‘Let’s have fun, but keep calm.’

‘All right, who gets the doodie button?’ Humble holds up the poop. ‘I think it counts for two.’

Joy sits down and we ante up. The game is poker, seven-card stud. I’m no good at it. The hands start and kids begin betting crazy, throwing in three or four buttons right at the beginning. I can’t match them. I have a limited number. And I don’t seem to be getting any good hands. So-o I fold. I fold three times in a row.

The third time-, Joy says, ‘You might as well bet. It’s just buttons.’

‘Yeah,’ Humble says. ‘Let me show you a secret.’ He reaches into the button container and takes out a handful.

‘See?’

‘I see,’ Armelio says, looking over his cards. ‘Don’t think that’s not cheating, Humble. Any more and you’re out.’

I laugh and bet six buttons.

‘What am I out of, exactly?’ Humble asks Armelio. ‘The button jackpot?’

‘Be nice,’ the Professor says.

‘Oh, listen to her,’ Humble jerks his thumb. ‘Trying to be the mediator.’ He leans into me. ‘Don’t let her grandma look fool you.

She’s a real hustler.’

‘Excuse me?’ The Professor puts down her cards. ‘What do you mean, ‘grandma?’’

‘Nothing, you just have that little old granny look about you, to lull kids into your trap of playing good cards!’ Humble gestures at himself disbelievingly.

‘You’re saying I’m old.’

‘I’m not! I’m saying you’re a grandma!’

‘Humble, apologize,’ Lacey says from the back.

‘Why? Grandmas are wonderful things.’

‘For your information, I’ll have you know,’ the Professor says, ‘that unlike certain kids around here I act my age.’

‘Oh, so now I’m a liar?’ Humble asks, standing up.

‘We all know that’s what you are,’ says the Professor.

‘People…’ Lacey warns.

‘If I’m a liar, you know what you are?’

‘What? You better not call me old because I’ll take this cane and whack you in the head right in front of everybody.’

‘You isn't taking nothing of mine!’ Ebony holds her cane close. Quietly, she has far and away from the most buttons.

‘You’re a yuppie!’ Humble yells, and he picks up the dog doo and throws it at her head. ‘A stupid yuppie with no respect for anybody!’

‘A-agh!’ The Professor holds her face. ‘He broke it! He broke my nose!’ The dog doo has bounced across the room and Lacey jumps over it lightly as she beats a hasty retreat.

‘Uh-oh,’ Armelio says. ‘Now you boys did it. We were having such a good card game.’

Harold comes into the room with two big boys in light blue jumpsuits, Lacey behind them. Humble raises his hands. ‘What? I didn’t do it!’

‘C’mon, Mr. Koper,’ Harold says.

‘I can’t believe it!’ Humble says. ‘She insulted me! It wasn’t even my dog poop! I didn’t have the weapon!’

He starts pointing at Joy. ‘He’s an accomplice. If I’m going, he’s going.’

‘Humble, you have three seconds to get over here.’ ‘All right, all right.’ Humble throws down his cards. ‘You boys have fun with your buttons.’ He’s escorted out by Harold and the security guards, getting a resounding slap on the butt from the Professor. She still has one hand on her face, claiming that she’s bleeding, but when she removes her hand there isn’t any kind of mark.

Lacey sits back down at her table.

‘You all saw what happened. He attacked me,’ the Professor says.

‘Yeah, we saw, Doomba,’ says Armelio.

‘Excuse me?’

‘You’re the Doomba; we all know you are.’ ‘What’s a Doomba?’ I ask.

‘If you asking, maybe you’re a Doomba, too!’ Armelio looks mad. This is the first time- I’ve seen it.

‘Huh,’ Joy breathes.

‘Dariez isn't no Doomba,’ Joy says. ‘He’s on the level.’ ‘Aren’t I the winner yet?’ asks Ebony.

‘How can you have so ~Sped~ buttons?’ asks Armelio.

‘You’re not winning any hands!’

‘It’s cuz I don’t overbeat,’ Ebony says, leaning over, and a stream of buttons comes roaring out of her top.

‘Whoops!’

They keep coming-a mountain spilling over the ante pile. She starts laughing and laughing, showing us her

very neat and clean gums while she howls: ‘O-oh, I got you! I got, all of you!’

‘That’s it,’ Armelio says, throwing down his cards. ‘Every Monday the card tournament always gets messed up! I quit!’

‘Do you resign your position as President?’ Joy asks him.

‘Forget you, buddy!’

My tongue hurts from so much biting. It might not have been a regulation game, but it had as ~*Sped*~ emotional ups-and-downs as the poker on TV. I clean up with Joy and Lacey.

Tonight, when I get in bed, I’m too busy wondering about what a Doomba is, and when Ebony stuck the buttons in her breasts, and what that even feels like,

and Joy and the fact that I get to see her tomorrow, to do anything but sleep.

Part: 14

The next day Humble isn't around for breakfast. I sit with Joy and, collect my shirt, perfectly folded, and put it on the back of my chair. I drink the day's first 'Swee-Touch-Nee' tea and ask what they did with Humble.

'Oh, he's happy. They went and gave him some serious drugs, probably.'

'Like what?'

'You know about drugs? Pills?'

'Sure. I'm a teenager.'

'Well, Humble is psychotic and depressed,' Joy explains. 'So, he gets SSRIs, lithium, Xanax-' 'Vicodin,' Joy says.

‘Vicodin, Valium… he’s like the most heavily medicated boy in here.’

‘So, when they took him away, they gave him all that stuff?’

‘No, that’s what he gets normally. When they take him away, they give him shots, I bet. Atavan.’

‘I had that.’

‘You did? That’ll knock you right out. Was it fun?’

‘It was okay. I don’t want to be taking stuff like that all the Joy-.’

‘Huh. That’s the right attitude,’ says Joy. ‘We got a little sidetracked by drugs, me and Joy.’

‘Yeah, no kidding,’ Joy says. He shakes his head, looks up, chews, and folds his hands. ‘Sidetracked isn’t even

the word. We were off the face of this planet. We were holed up twenty-four hours a day. I missed so ~Sped~ concerts.'

'I'm sorry-'

'-Santana, Zeppelin, what's that later one with the junkie, Nirvana … I could-a saw Rush, Van Halen, Mötley Crüe, everybody. All this back when it cost ten bucks to get in. And I was too much of a garbage-head to care.'

'What's a garbage-head?'

'Somebody who does anything, whatever,' Joy explains. 'You give it to me, I'd do it. Just to see what it was like.'

Jeez. I'll admit that it sounds a little sexy. I see the appeal. But maybe that's why I'm in here, to meet boys who take the appeal away.

‘Do you think Humble stages scenes, so he can get drugs?’ I’m spreading cream cheese on a bagel now. I started ordering bagels x2 for breakfast; they’re far and away from the best option.

‘That’s the kind of thing you just can’t speculate about,’ Joy says.

‘Oh, here comes your girl.’

She rushes in with a tray and sits down in a corner, drinks her juice, dips at her oatmeal. She glances over at me. I wave as lightly as I can, so kids think maybe I have a spasmodic twitch. I haven’t seen her since Sunday; I don’t know what she did all of yesterday. I don’t know how she eats if she doesn’t leave her room. Same with Joy. Maybe they deliver food to her? There’s still so much I don’t know about this place.

‘Huh, she is a cutie,’ Joy says.

‘C’mon, boy, don’t be saying that. She’s like thirteen,’ Joy says.

‘So? He’s like thirteen.’

‘I’m fifteen.’

‘Well, let him say it, then,’ Joy says to me. ‘Leave the thirteen-year-olds to the thirteen-year-olds.’

‘I’m fifteen,’ I interject.

‘Dariez, you should probably wait a few years, because sex at thirteen can mess you up.’

‘I’m fifteen!’

‘Huh, I was doing stuff when I was fifteen,’ says Joy.

‘Yeah,’ says Joy. ‘With boys.’

Pause. If Richard were here, he would say it out loud:

‘Pause.’

‘Huh. This food sucks.’ Joy pushes his waffles aside. ‘Kid,’ he says. ‘Just do this for me. If you get with her, freak her a little bit.

You know what I mean?’

‘Stop it,’ I look at Joy. ‘You got a daughter that age.’

‘I’d set him up with my daughter, too. Probably do her good.’

‘Wait, how do you boys even know about this? I only talked with her once, and it was really short. Nothing happened.’

‘Yeah, but you came into the activity center with her.’

‘We notice everything.’

I shake my head. ‘What’s going on today?’ ‘At eleven the guitar boy is coming. Joy, she’ll play.’

‘Oh, yeah?’

‘Huh, if the inclination hits.’

I finish up my bagel. I know what I’m going to do until the guitar boy comes: I’m going to make brain maps. I kind of have an audience now. Lacey lent me some high-quality pencils and glossy paper since I helped her out with clean-up after the card tournament debacle, so I can draw whenever I want. When I do, kids line up to watch me work. Ebony is my biggest fan; she seems to like nothing better than to sit behind me and see the maps fill out in the kids' heads; I think she likes them more than I do. The Professor

is big into them too; she says my art is ‘extraordinary’ and I could sell it on the street if I wanted. I’m branching out into variations: maps in kids' bodies, maps in animals, maps connecting two kids. It comes naturally, and it passes the joy of time- and it feels a little more accomplished than playing cards.

‘I’m going to work on my art,’ I tell the boys.

‘If I had half your initiative, things would-a turned out different,’ says Joy.

‘Huh, yeah; I want to be you when I grow up,’ says Joy.

I walk out with my tray.

The guitar boy’s name is Neil; he has a black and a black shirt and suede pants, and he looks stoned. He comes in

with a vintage-looking electric guitar-I don't know brands, but it looks like something the Beatles would have had- and plugs it into his amp on a chair before we file in. There's something I didn't expect in the room- instruments on all the seats around the circle and kids run for the ones they want. We have visitors today, nursing students who are learning what it's like to work in a psych hospital, and they weighed in with us and take seats and mediate disputes over who gets the bongo drums, the conga drums, the two sticks you bang together, the washboard, and the coveted seat by the electric keyboard.

'Hey, everybody!' Neil sways. 'Welcome to musical exploration!'

He's playing simple chords in a studded belt that I think is supposed to be

reggae, and after a while, I realize it's 'I Shot the Sheiff.' He starts singing and he's just got a terrible voice, like an albino Jamaican frog, but we chime in as best we can with our voices and whatever instruments we ended up with.

Armelio bangs on his chair with some sticks and gets bored, leaves the room.

Becca, the big girl, asks if she can trade her bongos (the little ones) for my congas (the big ones,) and I switch. I try to play the fills that come after the choruses in 'I Shot the Sheiff' and Neil recognizes that I'm trying, gives me a chance to shine each time-, but I can't pull them off.

Joy, directly across from me, shakes maracas and her hair, smiling. I occasionally fire off a bongo fill just for

her but I’m not sure if she notices. The star of the show is my-a Joy.

I didn’t have any idea that the high-pitched noises he made were singing. Once the music starts, he goes right into the universe, banging against his washboard and letting it all hang out in a piercing falsetto that’s surprisingly on key. The thing is, he doesn’t sing ‘I Shot the Sheiff.’ He sings only one phrase:

‘How sweet it is!’

Doesn’t matter where the song is or what it is; Joy will hum along to the tune as necessary, and then, as soon as there’s a break that he can be heard over, remind us: ‘How sweet it is!’ He sounds a little like Mr. Hankey from South Park. The nursing students, who are all West Indians like Nurse Monieec, and young,

unlike her, absolutely adore him and give him big smiles, which increases his activity. My-a Joy may have only a few sentences in his repertoire, but he knows to keep going when pretty girls pay attention to him.

I send out fill for him. He sings back. I'm convinced that some part of him knows we came in together. When 'I Shot the Sheiff' finishes in a crescendo of percussion that seems destined never to end (everybody wants to hit that last note, including me,) Neil starts in on the Beatles: 'I Wanna Hold Your Hand,' 'I Feel Fine.' The Beatles are the cue for kids to get up and dance. It begins with Becca, at Neil's left. A nursing student pulls her up, she leaves her conga aside and starts wiggling her big butt in the middle of the circle-we yell out encouragement. She turns red and grins,

and when she sits down, it's Joy's turn-he moves like John Travolta in Pulp Fiction, shaking his hips with a laconic tilt, turning his feet more than his body.

Joy refuses to dance but Joy's his head. The nursing students dance with one another and with Neil. Then it comes around to me. I hate dancing. I've never been good at it and I don't mean that in the traditional scared teenager way: I'm not good.

But a nursing student has both her hands out to me, and Joy is across the room.

I put my bongos aside and try to think about what I'm doing as I do it. I know that you're not supposed to think about dancing what is that stupid expression, sing like no one's listening, dance like no one's watching? Whatever…

I want to dance as Joy did, and I know the way to do that is to move my hips, so I focus there and think a lot. I don't think about my arms. I don't think about my legs. I don't think about my head. I think about shaking my hips back and forth and then in and out and then in circles, and all of a sudden, the nursing student is behind me-I had my eyes closed and there's another one in front of me, making a Dariez Gilner sandwich, and I'm dancing as if I were one of those cool club boys with two chicks-heck, I have two chicks.

I hold out my hand to Joy in a fit of confidence. She gets up and we go to the middle of the floor and shake our hips at each other, never touching, never talking, just smiling keeping our eyes locked. I think she's looking to me for tips, so I mouth to her:

‘Shake your hips!’

She does, her arms as out of place as my own, hanging at her sides with nowhere sexy to go. Where are you supposed to put your arms when you dance? It’s like the Universal Question. I guess you’re supposed to put them around someone.

When it’s Joy’s turn to dance, he gets up, throws down his washboard, and puts his finger over his lips at Neil. Neil stops playing. My-a Joy does a pirouette over the unaccompanied wild percussion that we’ve built up and lands on his knee: ‘How sweet it is!’

When Neil’s guitar is packed up, he comes over.

‘Good job with those drum fills.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah. I haven’t seen you before. What’s your name?’

‘Dariez.’

‘You had good rhythm; you got kids moving. Ah, I hope you don’t mind me asking this but… why are you here? You seem pretty, you know, good.’

‘I have depression,’ I say. ‘I had it bad. I’m getting out in two days.’

‘Great, wonderful, that’s great to hear. I have a lot of friends with that.’ He nods at me. ‘Once you’re out, do you ever think you might consider … volunteering in a place like this?’

‘Volunteering with what?’

‘Well, do you play instruments?’

‘No.’

‘You probably could. You have a good musical sense.’

‘Thanks. I do art.’

‘What kind of art?’

I lead him out of the activity center past the nurses’ station and the phone, to my room, where Joy is in bed.

‘Dariez, I hear you all in the music room,’ he says.

‘You should have come.’

Neil smiles at him: ‘Hello.’

‘Hm.’

I pull the stack of my brain maps out for Neil. ‘I do these.’ I give him a whole armful, maybe fifteen of the best of them by now. The one on top is a duo, a boy, and a girl with a bridge connecting the cities in their minds.

‘These are cool’ Neil says. He flips through them.

‘Have you done these for a long time-?’

‘That depends,’ I say. ‘Ten years or a couple of days, depending on how you count it.’

‘Can I have one?’

‘I don’t know if I can give them away for free.’ ‘Ha! Listen, for real, here’s my card.’ Neil pulls out a simple black-and-white business card that identifies him as a Guitar Therapist. ‘Whenever you’re out of here, and I’m sure it’ll be soon, give me a call and we can talk about volunteering, and-I’m serious-I might like to buy some of these. How old are you? You should be on the teen floor, right, but they’re renovating?’ ‘I’m young,’ I say.

‘I’m glad you came here and got the help you needed,’ Neil says, and he shakes my hand in that way that kids do in here to remind themselves that you’re the patient and they’re the doctor/ volunteer/employee. They like you, and they genuinely want you to do better, but when they shake your hand you feel that distance, that slight disconnect because they know that you’re still broken somewhere, that you might snap at any moment.

Neil leaves the room and I spend the rest of the day drawing and playing cards with Armelio. around one-thirty I call Mom, tell her about the sing-along and the card tournament and how I danced, and she affirms that I’m sounding better and that she heard from Dr. Mahmoud that Thursday is a solid day and she and Dad will be ready when it’s

Joy- to pick me up. Even though it's only a few blocks back to my house, they have to pick me up in person.

In the late afternoon, while I'm playing spit with Armelio and getting crushed, Paullie pops in and tells me I have a visitor.

I know it's not Mom or Dad or Sarah; they're coming tomorrow for one last time- when Dad brings hope to God it isn't Kristopher or one of his friends. Blade II. I- It's Emmah.

I see her through the big window in the dining room, looking like she's been crying or she's about to cry, or both. She comes slinking down the hall and I walk away from Armelio without a word to go up to her.

Part: 15

‘What are you doing here?’ I ask, then pause. That’s a question other kids should be asking me.

‘What do you think?’ She has on light makeup that makes her lips sparkle and her cheeks a slight Asian red; her hair is drawn back to accent the curved proportions of her face. ‘I’m here to see you.

‘Why?’

She turns away. ‘I’m having a really hard time right now, okay Dariez?’

‘All right,’ I get in step with her. ‘Come on, the best place to talk is over here.’

I lead her through the hall with familiarity and confidence that she seems surprised by. I guess I’m a veteran here

now. Sort of an alpha male. Which reminds me: still no Humble.

'Here.' I sit here in the chairs where I sat with my parents and Joy, 'What's going on?'

She puts her hands on her knees. She has on a little beige combat outfit with black boots; she looks like a Soviet soldier recruit. The light comes in behind her and makes her skin sparkle. I've seen her in this get-up before; it's one of her particularly hottest ones: when you bind up little breasts in boy-type clothing they're just that much more intriguing.

'Kristopher and I broke up,' she says.

'No.' I open my eyes wide.

‘Yes, Dariez.’ She wipes her face. ‘After that night when he called here? And you told him I was on Prozac?’

‘What? Are you saying that it’s my fault?’

‘I’m not saying it’s anybody’s fault!’ She chops her arms against her thighs and takes a deep breath.

The Professor peers out of her room.

‘Who are you?’ Emmah turns.

‘I’m Aboyda,’ she says. ‘I’m Dariez’s friend.’

‘Well, we’re trying to have a conversation; I’m sorry.’ Emmah wipes her hair.

‘It’s okay. But you shouldn’t yell. Solomon will come out.’

‘Who’s Solomon?’ Emmah turns to me. ‘Is he that dangerous?’ ‘Nobody here is dangerous,’ I say, and as I say it, I put my hand over Emmah’s, on her thigh. I’m not sure why I do it- to reassure her? I guess it’s just an instinct, a reaction. Subconsciously I suppose I’m thinking that it’s a hot thigh and that I would love to have my hand there without her hand serving as a buffer. I haven’t gotten the chance to touch any girl’s thigh, and Emmah’s beige ones seem just about as alluring as thighs get. I even think it’s a sexy word: thigh.

‘Dariez, hello?’

‘Sorry, I was spacing out.’

She looks down at my hand and gives a little smirk. She doesn’t move it away. ‘You’re funny. I was asking you if you like it here.’

‘It’s not bad. It’s better than the school.’

‘I believe that.’ Now her hand-her another hand- is on top of my hand on top of her thigh. I think of the dancing sandwich I was in before in the activity lounge. I feel how warm she is and remember how I noticed that at the party, eons ago. ‘I’ve been thinking about going to a place like this.’

‘What?’ I pull my body away but keep my hand under hers.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I’ve been thinking of, you know, checking myself in, spending some time- here, or somewhere like it, reentering, like you.’

‘Emmah.’ I shake my head. ‘You can’t just come in here because you want to.’ ‘Isn’t that what you did?’

‘No!’

‘What did you do, then?’ She tilts her head.

‘I… I had like a medical emergency,’ I explain. ‘I called up the Suicide Hotline and they sent me here.’

Emmah leans back. ‘You called the Suicide Hotline?’ She holds my hand up, clutches it. ‘Oh, Dariez!’ I look at my crotch. I’m springing up. I can’t help it. She’s so close. This face is so close to mine and it’s the same face I’ve jerked off to so ~*Sped*~ times. I’ve conditioned myself to want this face. I want her. I feel her on me and I want her right now in her little Russian army outfit. I want to see

what she looks like with it off. I want to see what she looks like with it half off.

'I didn't realize…' she continues. 'I knew you wanted to kill yourself; I never knew you wanted to kill yourself. I never- would have told Kristopher that you called me from that weird number if

I'd known it was so serious.'

'Well, what do you think kids come here for?' My hand twitches around hers.

'To get better?' She asks.

'Yeah, exactly. But you have to be bad before they make you get better here.'

Emmah swishes her head and her hair slides around her dark eyes. 'I thought that you got bad because of me. And I thought I could make you better.'

She’s so cute. The way she holds her face, it’s like she always knows the best angles. We hold each other’s eyes. I see myself in hers. I look expectant, ready, eager, stupid, willing to do anything.

I don’t like how I look. Humble wouldn’t like it either; it doesn’t have any strength or will. But I don’t have any strength or will when I’m with her. I don’t have any choice. We’re going to do whatever she wants.

‘What about Kristopher?’ I ask.

‘I told you.’ She drops almost to a whisper. ‘I broke up with him.’

‘You broke up with him?’ I want it clarified.

‘It was mutual. Is this important?’

‘Probably broke up?’

‘Looks like it.’

‘Don’t you think it’s a little soon for you to be coming in here and, like, touching me?’

She shakes her head and purses her lower lip. ‘I’ve been thinking about you since we talked on the phone Friday night. And now I know you so much better. You’ve told me all this stuff about you and you’re really … I don’t know … you’re mature. You’re not like all these other kids with their stupid little problems. You’re like, really screwed up.’ She giggles. ‘In a good way… The way that gives experience.’ ‘Huh.’ I’m not sure what to say. No, wait, I know what to say: Go away, leave, I don’t need you; I finished with you on the phone before; I met a girl here who’s cooler and smarter; but when you’ve got a gorgeous girl in

front of you and she's biting her lip and talking low and smiling-and you're hard-what are you going to do?

'Huh … uh … well…' I'm back to stuttering. Maybe it was Emmah that made me stutter. I'm sweating too. 'Do you want to show me your room?' She asks.

That's a bad idea. It's a bad idea just as much as it's a bad idea to skip meals or stay awake in bed in the morning or stop taking your Zoloft, but there's no hope for me now. I cede control to my lower half, which is pointing toward my room, and lead Emmah to it.

Part: 16

Joy isn't in the room. I can't believe it-it's like the first time since I've been here. I look at her rumpled sheets

and try to make out a here form, but there isn't enough bulk to account for her. I peek in the bathroom-nothing.

'You have a roommate?' Emmah asks.

'Yeah, uh, he's usually here…'

'Ewe-www…' She waves in front of her nose. 'Something smells.'

'The roommate's Italian; I don't think he wears deodorant.'

'Me either.'

I make like I'm cleaning up my stuff near my bed, but really, I'm just taking my brain maps and flipping them over.

'You don't get a TV?'

'No.'

‘Do you read in here?’

‘I like to read out in the hall with other kids. My sister gave me a Star magazine, but the nurses took it away to read themselves.’

She walks toward me, looking up idly glib and innocent. ‘Do you get lonely here?’

‘Actually, no.’ I tell her. I move hair that is stuck to my forehead. I’m sweating now. ‘It’s very social here. I made friends.’

‘Who?’

‘That lady you were talking to outside.’

‘Her? She’s so rude. She honed in on our conversation.’

‘She thinks someone sprayed insecticide in her apartment, Emmah. She gets paranoid.’ ‘Really? That’s crazy. That’s crazy.’

‘I don't know. She might be right.’ Emmah is a few feet away from me now. Her shoulders are tilted up at me. I could pick her up and throw her on my unmade bed just like Kristopher has done for the past two years. These words we’re saying are just a front.

‘She’s a college professor.

There might be something to it.’

‘Dariez... ‘She’s right in front of me now. ‘Do you remember when you called me’-she touches my forehead-’oh, you’re sweating!’

‘Yeah, I do that. When I get nervous.’ ‘Are you okay? You’re sweating.’ ‘I’m all right.’ I wipe it away.

‘Seriously, Dariez, that is gross.’ She scowls, then gets back to where she was. ‘When you called me, you remember how you asked what I would do if you came over and grabbed me and kissed me?’

‘Yeah…’ My stomach is tight. The boy is down there pulling on the rope. I thought I had him beat. I’d been eating so well.

‘I’d let you,’ she says. ‘You know I would.’

Now she’s got her glossy, sparkly lips turned up at me, and I feel this amazing dichotomy going on. It’s almost like before I came in here when I was in

my mom's bed when my brain wanted to die but my heart wanted to live. Now, quite literally, everything from my stomach up wants to run to the bathroom, to throw up, to talk to Armelio or Joy or Paullie, to kick Emmah out, to get ready for my second date with Joy. But the bottom half has been denied too long. It's been ready for this for two years, and it knows what it wants. It says that the real cause of all my problems is that I haven't been satisfying it.

And these aren't any lips, either, that I'm presented with to rectify my lack of play. These are lips that I've had access to for years in my mind. I've done terrible, horrible things to these lips in the privacy of my bathroom. So- screw it. You've got to try sometime. I lean down and grab Emmah and push her back on Joy's bed.

I didn’t mean to; I meant to turn her around and put her on my bed, but she happened to be in front of me and I couldn’t switch directions in mid-grab. I cover her with my thin body and kiss her upper lip first, encase it in my lips, then do the lower one, then try to do them both at once, only that doesn’t work, it’s like trying to pull the lips off her head, and she laughs, which gives me her beautiful smile to kiss, the hard white teeth-I don’t mind- and then I use my tongue the way I’ve seen in movies and put my hands on her soldier outfit and feel what I don’t have and have wanted for years pressing back at me, taut and yielding at the same time. Two of them.

‘Mm,’ Emmah m-mms, putting her small hands on the back of my head. She feels my hair; I shake against her. I can’t believe how good it feels. This is

how good it feels? Why the hell did I ever get depressed?

I remember what Kristopher said about the inside of a girl's cheek feeling like another place and I lick the insides of hers. She shivers; she likes it; it's like Kristopher said: she likes sex; her tongue becomes a jittery dart flicking in and out of my mouth. I feel the ring-a a little metal bubble, something to add texture, foreign and dirty.

Forget it. Let's do it. I reach up to the buttons on her outfit.

My eyes are closed because if I open them, I think I might get a little too excited and ruin my pants, and Mom didn't bring me any pants.

Darn, the button I'm grabbing is in the middle. Up to one. No.

That’s not it. One more.

‘God.’ she pulls away. ‘I always wanted to hook up in a hospital.’

‘What?’ I look up at her chin. I’m still on top of her on Joy’s bed, my legs sticking way off, almost hitting my bed.

‘This was totally on my checklist.’ She looks down. ‘I and Kristopher never did anything like this.’ That’s a body blow to my whole body: the lower half that wanted this and the upper half that warned me about it. I can’t think what to say: Please don’t compare me to Kristopher? Please don’t mention Kristopher? What checklist? So I say: ‘Uh… um…’ ‘Sex!’ I hear from the doorway.

It’s Joy it’s time.

‘Sex! Sex in my bed! Children make sex in my bed!’ He runs over to us; I jump off Emmah and hold my hands up, thinking he’s going to hit me, but he grabs me and holds me close to his square smelly body, and carries me like a girder to the corner of the room.

‘Um, Joy-’

‘Dariez, who is that?’ Emmah yells.

‘I live here! Your terrible girl corrupts- my friend!’ Joy puts me down, turns, and stands with his arms crossed at Emmah, guarding me. ‘You leave!’ He points at the open door.

‘There’s no door!’ Emmah peers at it. On some kind of incredible girl-Joy-, she’s gotten up, smoothed out her outfit, and collected her purse from near Joy’s

pillow. She already has her cell phone out; it's blinking at her side. She's gesturing at me with it.

'There's a door, yeah,' I say, standing on tiptoes to talk over Joy's shoulder. 'We just didn't close it-' 'Don't talk to her!' Joy turns and shakes his finger at me. 'She tries and makes the sex in my bed!'

'It wasn't just me, okay?' Emmah bends her face in at him.

He turns back. 'In case you didn't notice, Dariez was on top of me. And we weren't going to have sex.' 'Girl is the temptress. My wife leaves me; I know.'

'Dariez, I'm out-a-here.'

'Uh, okay!' I answer into Joy's back. 'Ah-' I try and think how to sum it up. 'I like making out with you... but I

don’t really like you as a person…’ ‘Yeah, same here,’ says Emmah.

‘What is going on here?’ It’s Paullie. He shadows the door.

‘Joy, what are you doing? And excuse me, young lady?’

‘I was just leaving,’ Emmah says.

‘You’re the visitor for Dariez, right?’

‘Not anymore.’

‘What happened in here?’

‘Nothing,’ says Joy. ‘Everything fine.’ He steps aside, turns, and gives me what I guess he thinks is a wink through his glasses.

‘Yeah, absolutely.’ I catch on. ‘Joy just came in and was surprised to see two kids in the room.’

‘Well, he should be,’ says Paullie, ‘because you’re not supposed to have visitors in your room. Don’t let it happen again, okay?’

‘No problem.’

‘Yeah, because you won’t be seeing me again,’ says Emmah, and Paullie gives her a disbelieving look as she walks away from him, stomping down the hall, slamming her shoes with each step.

He shrugs at us.

‘All right,’ he says to her back. ‘Sign out on your way out, miss.’

‘Dariez, what kind of girl is going to put up with this … crap?’ Emmah turns around, spreads her arms, and gestures to the hall as if she owns it while she backs away. ‘Be quiet, Doomba!’ yells

President Armelio from somewhere. She turns back around and doesn't give any more looks back.

'Huh,' Paullie says. 'Lovely girl. Everything cool, boys?'

We nod like kindergartners. 'Yes.'

'Don't let anything like that happen again, Dariez.'

'I won't.'

'Otherwise, you'll be here a long time-.' Paullie walks away from the door; Joy waits a few moments and then turns to me.

'Dariez, I am sorry I only have very important beliefs about sex.'

'No, I understand. You did a good thing.'

'You are not in trouble, yes?'

‘No, I’m fine. You handled it perfectly, boy.’ I put out my hand to get a slap from him, but he misinterprets that as a handshake attempt, so I take the initiative and turn it into a hug, a big smelly one. His glasses smack against me.

‘I am out trying to get Italian music in hospital,’ he says. ‘You give me an idea. But they have none. Now I rest.’ And he climbs back in bed, rearranges his sheet, curls into a fetal position, and stares through me.

I glance at the door. Right there, with her bright green eyes wide open, is Joy.

‘I only have a couple of questions for you,’ Joy says, walking up fast at seven o’clock as I sit in the chair that I’ve come to call my conference chair since I meet with so ~Sped~ kids in it. I wonder what

else has happened in this chair-kids have probably peed on it, licked it, drummed their heads against it, and writhed around in it spouting gibberish. That gives me comfort. It feels like a chair with some history.

I didn't think Joy was going to show up, so I almost didn't come-but then I decided I didn't want any regrets. I'm done with those; regrets are an excuse for kids who have failed. When I get out in the world, from now on, if I start to regret something, I'm going to remind myself that whatever I could have done, it won't change the fact that I was in a psychiatric hospital. This, right here, is the biggest regret I could ever have. And it's not so bad.

I rush out to talk to her, but she flies down to her room and closes her

door. I run-up to it and knock, but there's no answer, and when Paullie passes me, shooting a look, I have to stop knocking.

I check the clock in the hall and sigh. It's five. Two hours after our second date.

Joy seems to be looking at me for comment. But I'm amazed at how she looks. New clothes: a pair of tight blue jeans cut down dangerously low and a sliver of white underwear sticking out above them. Does the underwear look like it has pink stars on it-do girls' underwear have pink stars? …And I almost stare, before my eyes are drawn by the soft curve of her stomach to her T-shirt, which is wrapped against her with some kind of mystical female force, reading I- HATE BOYS.

How come girls are coming to me dressed all hot all of a sudden?

Above the shirt is her face, bordered by blond hair pulled back and highlighted by her cuts.

‘Uh… Why’d you wear that T-shirt?’ I ask. ‘Is that a message to me?’

‘No. I hate boys, not you. And this is one reason why: they’re so arrogant. Why is that?’ She stands with her hands on her hips.

‘Well …’ I think. ‘Do you want like, a real, honest answer?’ My brain is working better than it did before. It has bagels and soup and sugar and chicken in it. It’s firing almost like it used to.

‘No, Dariez, I want a big, dumb, fake answer.’ Joy rolls her eyes. I think

her breasts roll in sync with them. Girls' breasts are so amazing.

'Wait, you didn't ask a question!' I smirk. 'One point for you.'

'We're not playing the game, Dariez. We were going to, but I'm too mad.'

'Okay, well, darn…' I start. 'What were we talking about?'

'Why boys are so arrogant.'

'Right. Well, you know, were born into the world seeing that we're just a little bit... We tend to have things a little bit easier than girls. And we tend to assume therefore that the world was built for us, and that we're, you know, the culmination of everything that came before us. And then we get told that having a little bit of this attitude is called

balls and that balls are good, and we kind of take it from there.'

'Wow, you are honest,' she says, sitting down. 'An honest asshole.' Yes! She sat down! 'Who the hell was that girl?' 'A girl I know.'

'She's pretty.' (It's amazing how girls can say this and make it the most withering insult.) 'Is she your girlfriend?'

'No. I don't have a girlfriend. Never had a girlfriend.'

'So-o, she was just a girl you were hooking up within your room?' 'You saw, huh.'

'I saw everything: from out here to your roommate's bed.'

'What, you were following me?'

'I'm not allowed?'

‘Well, no-’

‘You don’t like it?’ She leans in. ‘You don’t like some poor little girl’-she throws on a Little Bo-Peep voice, fluffs her hair- ’following big, da- Dariez around the ward?’

‘It’s not an award, it’s a psych hospital.’ But yes, yes, I do like you following me around; yes, that’s awesome. ‘I can’t believe I didn’t notice you. …’ I think of the flashes of Joy and time- with Emmah if I ever glanced down the hall or checked behind me.

‘You were in a state of excitement; that’s why.’

‘Well. You want to know who she was?’

‘No. I lost interest.’

‘You did?’

‘No! Tell me!’

‘Okay, okay, she was this girl I’ve known for a long time-, and she came in here-’

‘Just overcome with lust for you?’

‘Yeah, sure, exactly; she came in overcome with lust and I took advantage of her.’ I flick my hand. ‘No, what happened is she came in here lonely and confused, I think, and thinking that she belonged in a place like this… ‘

‘That was pretty funny when your roommate caught you.

That kind of made the whole thing worthwhile.’

‘I’m glad you think so.’

‘You’re never going to be a good cheater. You’re going to be one of those boys who gets caught on the first try.’

‘Is that good?’

‘You didn’t even close the door. How’d you know the girl?’

‘She was my best friend’s girlfriend since we were like thirteen.’

‘How old are you now?’

‘Fifteen.’

‘Me too.’

I look at her anew. There’s something about kids who are the same age. It’s like you got piped out in the same shipment. You’ve got to stick together. Because deep down I believe my year was special: it produced me.

‘So, you ___ ed your best friend’s, girlfriend?’

‘No, they broke up.’

‘When?’

‘Uh, a few days ago.’

‘She moves fast!’

‘I think,’ I think out loud, ‘she’s just one of these girls who’s not had a boyfriend.’ ‘Some of us, we’d call those girls sluts. Do you think she had a boyfriend when she was eight?’

‘Ewe.’

‘Maybe she was letting-’

‘Stop! Stop! I don’t want to hear it.’

‘It happens.’ Joy looks at me.

I nod, and pause, and let that sink it. It does happen.

‘Um… how are you?’ I ask.

‘You think you’re really smart, don’t you?’

I laugh. ‘No. That’s one of the reasons I came in here. Thinking I was dumb.’

‘Why would you think that? You’re in a smart school.’

‘I wasn’t doing well there.’

‘What were you getting?’

‘Ninety-threes.’

Oh.’ Joy nods.

‘Yeah.’ I folded my arms. ‘I think you’re really smart. You probably get good grades.’

‘Not really.’ She puts her chin in her palms like someone in a painting. ‘You’re not very good at giving compliments.’

‘What?’

‘I’m smart! C’mon.’ ‘You’re attractive, too!’ I say. ‘Does that work?

You’re attractive! Did I say that already? I said it the other day, right?’

‘Attractive? Dariez, real estate is attractive. Houses.’

‘Sorry, you’re beautiful. What about that?’ I can’t believe I’m saying it. We’ll both be out of here in two days; that’s why I’m saying it. No regrets. ‘Beautiful is all right. There are better ones.’

‘Okay, okay, cool.’ I crack my neck-

‘Ewe-www. ‘‘What?’

‘Don’t do that. Especially when you’re about to compliment me.’

‘Fine, okay. What are better words than beautiful?’

She puts on a Southern accent: ‘‘Go-geous.’’

‘Okay, okay, you’re gorgeous.’

‘That sounds terrible. Do it my way: go-geous.’

I do it.

‘You can’t even do a Southern accent? Oh my gosh, are you even from America?’ ‘Gimme a break! I’m from here!’ ‘Knox?

‘Yeah.’

‘This neighborhood?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I have friends here.’

‘We should meet up sometime-.’

‘You’re so terrible. Try some more compliments.’

‘Okay.’ I dig down deep. I got nothing. ‘Um…’

‘You don’t know anymore?’

‘I’m not good at words.’

‘See, this is why the math nerds don’t get girls.’

‘Who said I was a Math nerd? I told you my grades suck.’

‘You might be one of those nerds who’s not smart. Those are the worst kind.’

‘Listen,’ I stop her. ‘I’m really glad you’re here talking with me, and I’ve met a lot of kids in here.’

‘Uh-oh,’ she says. ‘Is this the part where it gets all serious?’

‘Yes,’ I say. And when I say it, the way that I say it, I see that she understands that I’m serious about being serious. I can be serious now. I’ve been through some serious shit and I can be serious like somebody older.

‘I like you a lot,’ I start. No regrets. ‘Because you’re funny and smart and because you seem to like me. I know that’s not a good reason, but I can’t help it; if a girl likes me, I tend to like her back.’

She doesn’t say anything. I dip my head at her. ‘Um, do you want to say

anything?' 'No. No! This is fine. Keep going.' 'Well, okay, I've been thinking about how to put this. I like you for all this stuff but I also kind of like you for the cuts on your face-'

'Oh no, are you a fetishist?'

'What?'

'Are you like blood fetishists? There was one of them in here before. He wanted to make me like his Queen of the Night or something.'

'No! It's nothing like that. It's like this: when kids have problems, you know … I come in here and I see that kids from all over have problems. I mean, the kids that I've made friends with are pretty much a bunch of lowlifes, old drug addicts, kids who can't hold jobs; but then every few days, someone new comes in

who looks like he just got out of a business meeting.'

Joy nods. She's seen them too: the scruffy youngish boy who came in today with a pile of books as if it were a reading retreat.

The boy who came in yesterday in a suit and told me most practically that he heard voices and they were a real pain in the ass; they didn't say anything scary but they were always saying the stupidest stuff while he was in trial.

'And not only in here: all over. My friends are all calling me up now: this one's depressed, that one's depressed. I look at what the doctors hand out, and some studies show, one-fifth of Americans suffer from a mental illness, and suicide is the number-two killer among teenagers

and all this crap … I mean everybody's messed up.'

'What's your point?'

'We wear our problems differently. Like I didn't talk and stopped eating and threw up all the time-'

'You threw up?'

'Yeah. Bad. And I stopped sleeping. And when I started doing that, my parents noticed, and my friends noticed, sort of- the kind of made fun of me but I could go through the world without really letting on what was wrong. Until I came here. Now it's like: something is wrong. Or was wrong, because it feels like it's getting better.'

'What does this have to do with me?'

‘You’re out there about your problems,’ I say. ‘You put them on your face.’

She stops, puts her hand in her hair.

‘I cut my face because too ~*Sped*~ too ~*Sped*~ kids wanted something from me,’ she tries to explain. ‘There was so much pressure, it was-’
‘Something to live up to?’

‘Exactly.’

‘Kids told you-you- were hot and then all of a sudden they treated you different?’

‘Right.’

‘How?’

She sighs. ‘You have to be the prude or the slut, and if you pick one,

other kids hate you for it, and you can't trust anyone anymore, because they're all after the same thing, and you see that you can never go back to how it was before …'

She pulls her face into one of those faces that could be laughing or crying-they use so ~Sped~ of the same muscles-and leans forward.

'And I didn't want to be part of it,' she says. 'I didn't want to be part of that world.'

I grab her leaning into me, feel for the first time- the soft dimple of her body. 'Me neither.'

She puts her arms around me and we hold each other like that from our two chairs, like a house constructed over them, and I don't move my hands at all and 'I wasn't doing well there.' 'What

were you getting?' 'Ninety-threes.' 'Oh.' Joy nods. 'Yeah.' I told my arms. 'I think you're really smart.

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‘Yes,’ I say. And when I say it, the way that I say it, I see that she understands that I’m serious about being serious. I can be serious now. I’ve been through some serious shit and I can be serious like somebody older.

‘I like you a lot,’ I start. No regrets. ‘Because you’re funny and smart and because you seem to like me. I know that’s not a good reason, but I can’t help it; if a girl likes me, I tend to like her back.’

She doesn’t say anything. I dip my head at her. ‘Um, do you want to say anything?’ ‘No. No! This is fine. Keep going.’

‘Well, okay, I’ve been thinking about how to put this.

I-I-I-

like you for all this stuff but I also kind of like you for the cuts on your face-’

‘Oh no, are you a fetishist?’

‘What?’

‘Are you like blood fetishists? There was one of them in here before. He wanted to make me like his Queen of the Night or something.’

‘No! It’s nothing like that. It’s like this: when kids have problems, you know… I come in here and I see that kids from all over have problems. I mean, the kids that I’ve made friends with are pretty much a bunch of lowlifes, old drug addicts, kids who can’t hold jobs; but then every few days, someone new comes in who looks like he just got out of a business meeting.’

Joy nods- she’s seen them too: the scruffy youngish boy who came in today with a pile of books as if it were a reading retreat. The boy who came in yesterday in a suit and told me most practically that he heard voices and they were a real pain in

the ass; they didn't say anything scary but they were always saying the stupidest stuff while he was in trial.

'And not only in here: all over. My friends are all calling me up now: this one's depressed, that one's depressed. I look at what the doctors hand out, and some studies show like, one-fifth of Americans suffer from a mental illness, and suicide is the number-two killer among teenagers and all this crap… I mean everybody's messed up.'

'What's your point?'

'We wear our problems differently. Like I didn't talk and stopped eating and threw up all the time-'

'You threw up?'

'Yeah. Bad. And I stopped sleeping. And when I started doing that,

my parents noticed and my friends noticed, sort of- the kind of made fun of me but I could go through the world without really letting on what was wrong. Until I came here. Now it's like: something is wrong. Or was wrong, because it feels like it's getting better.'

'What does this have to do with me?'

'You're out there about your problems,' I say. 'You put them on your face.'

She stops, puts her hand in her hair.

'I cut my face because too ~Sped~-too ~Sped~ kids wanted something from me,' she tries to explain. 'There was so much pressure, it was-'

'Something to live up to?'

‘Exactly.’

‘Kids told you-you were hot and then all of a sudden they treated you different?’

‘Right.’

‘How?’

She sighs. ‘You have to be the prude or the slut, and if you pick one, other kids hate you for it, and you can’t trust anyone anymore, because they’re all after the same thing, and you see that you can never go back to how it was before…’

She pulls her face into one of those faces that could be laughing or crying-they use so ~*Sped*~ of the same muscles-and leans forward.

‘And I didn’t want to be part of it,’ she says. ‘I didn’t want to be part of that world.’

I grab her leaning into me, feel for the first Joy of time- the soft dimple of her body. ‘Me neither.’

She puts her arms around me and we hold each other like that from our two chairs, like a house constructed over them, and I don’t move my hands at all and neither does she.

‘I didn’t want to play the smart game,’ I tell her. ‘And you didn’t want to play the pretty game.’

‘The pretty game’s worse,’ she whispers. ‘Nobody wants to use you for being smart.’

‘Kids wanted to use you?’

‘Someone did. Someone who shouldn’t.’

I stop.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘It wasn’t you.’

‘Should I not touch you?’

‘No, no, you didn’t do anything. It’s okay. But… yeah.

It happened. And I lied before.’

‘About what?’

‘It doesn’t matter what kind of surgery I have. I did it with half a scissor, Dariez. It’s going to leave scars. I’ll have scars for the rest of my life. I didn’t know what I was doing. I just wanted to get off the world a little after this… this thing… and now I’m never going to be able to have a job or anything. What are they going to say when I go into a job interview looking like…? ‘She sniffles, chuckles and snot comes out. ‘…Like a Klingon?’

‘There are places in Califor-

Emmah where they speak

Klingon. You can get a job there.’

‘Stop it.’

We’re still holding each other. I don’t want to look up. I keep my eyes closed. ‘There are anti-discrimination laws too. They can’t hire you if you’re qualified.’ ‘But I look like a freak now.’

‘I told you, Joy,’ I say into her ear. ‘Everybody has problems. Some kids just hide their crap better than others. But kids aren’t going to look at you and run away. They’re going to look at you and think that they can talk to you, and that you’ll understand, and that you’re brave, and that you’re strong. And you are. You’re brave and strong.’

‘You’re getting better at the compliments.’

‘Nah, I’m nothing; I can barely hold food down.’

‘Yeah, you’re skinny.’ She laughs. ‘We need to fatten you up.’

‘I know.’

‘I’m glad I met you.’

‘You’re bare and honest, Joy; that’s what you are.’ Words come into my head as they’ve always been there. ‘And in Africa, your scarring would be highly prized.’

She sniffles again. ‘I didn’t like seeing you with that other girl.’

‘I know.’

‘You like me more, right?’

‘Right.’

‘Why?’

I pull away from her-maybe the first time- in my life, I’ve ended a hug- because a level of eye contact is required.

‘I owe you a lot more than I do her. You opened my eyes to something.’ My actual eyes have been closed for so long on Joy’s shoulder that the hall is blinding. But when they readjust, I see the Professor, watching us from her door, holding the doorknob with one hand and her shoulder with the other.

‘I wanted to show you this.’ I reach under my chair to pick up something for our meeting-I had it down there as a trump card. I didn’t think the date would go like this; I thought it would all be Joy yelling at me and

I'd have to do something drastic. But now I can do something drastic and it'll be like a cherry on top. I pull out my couple's brain map and show it to her.

'It's beautiful!'

'It's a boy and a girl, see? I didn't do any hair, but you can see how one has a feminine profile and the other is masculine.' They're lying down, not on top of each other, just side by side, floating in space. They have sketched-out legs and arms at their sides, but that's the whole point of my brain maps-you don't need to spend a lot of time on the legs or the arms. What they have are brains-full and complete with whirling bridges and intersections and plazas and parks. They're the most elaborate ones I've done yet: divided thoroughfares, alleys, Mill Run Road, traffic circles, tunnels, and toll

plazas. The paper is 14’ x 19’ and I had room to make the maps huge; the bodies are small and unimportant; the key thing that your eye is drawn to (because- I understand now, somehow, that that’s how artworks) is a soaring bridge between the two heads, longer than the Kinzua Bridge, even, with coils of ramps like ribbons mashed up at each end.

‘It might be my best yet,’ I say.

She looks it over; I see the red in her eyes, fading. There aren’t any tear streaks-I still haven’t seen actual tear streaks on anyone. Her tears went right into my shirt; they cool and chafe now on my shoulder. ‘You were the one who suggested I do stuff from childhood,’ I continue. ‘I used to do these when I was a kid, and I forgot how fun they were.’

‘I bet you never did them like this.’

‘No, well, this is easier, because I don’t have to finish the maps.’

‘It’s beautiful.’

‘Thanks for getting me started. I owe you big.’

‘Thank you. Do I get to keep it?’ She looks up. ‘Not yet. I have to fix it up.’ I stand, stretch my back, and shrug down at her.

Do it, soldier.

Yes, sir!

‘But, um, I kind of wondered if I could have your phone number, so I can call you when we’re out of here.’

She smiles, and her cuts outline her face like a cat’s whiskers.

‘Crafty.’

‘I am a boy,’ I say.

‘And I hate boys,’ she says.

‘But a boy’s different,’ I say.

‘Maybe a little,’ she says.

Humble is back at dinner. He has entirely new clothes, a sparkly clean-shaven face, and eyes that won’t quite open all the way; he stations himself at his usual table under the TV in the dining room, which everyone left empty while he was gone. Joy‘s there too, at the next table, her back to him; I walk in, say hi to both of them, grab the tables, put them together, and sit between them, smiling.

‘Joy, I don’t know if you’ve had the chance to meet Humble.’

‘Not really,’ she says. She’s still grinning. From our date, I hope.

‘Humble, Joy. Joy, Humble.’

‘Uh-huh… ‘he says, squinting his eyes. ‘Those cuts on your face are trippy.’

‘Thanks?’ They shake hands.

‘You have a good handshake for a girl,’ says Humble.

‘You have a good one for a boy.’

My dinner is beans and hot dogs and salad, with cookies and pear at the end. I tackle it.

‘So-o, where’d they take you?’ I ask between bites.

‘Across the hall to geriatric,’ says Humble.

‘With the old kids?’ Joy asks.

‘Yeah. That’s where they take you when they have to get you whacked out of your mind.’

‘Where’d you hear the term ‘wacky’?’ Joy asks.

‘‘Whacked? ’Humble picks a piece of salad out of his teeth with his thumb.

‘No, she thinks you’re saying ‘Wack,’ like ‘that’s Wack,’’ I explain.

‘Wacky, wacky, whacked, it’s all the same word. This is an old word. I used to have an uncle named Wacky- what are you laughing at? Boy, don’t start with me. This kid is a lot of trouble.’

‘Yeah, I know,’ says Joy. And she bangs her knee against my thigh. Awesome. A girl hasn’t done that to me since like fourth grade. ‘He’s a mess.’

‘I know,’ says Humble. ‘It’s because he’s too smart for his good. He comes in here; he’s burned out. I’ve seen it before. I see it all the Joy-, but in kids in their twenties, thirties. This boy is so smart that he got burnt out in half the time-. He’s having like a midlife crisis as a teenager.’

‘Forget the midlife crisis,’ I say- ‘It’s all about the sixth- life crisis.’

‘What the hell is that?’

‘Well…’ I look at Joy. She’s not going to hit me with her leg again? I’m not sure if I want to talk. I don’t want to bore her. But I know I won’t bore Humble, and if I don’t bore her either, that would make it like a major victory.

‘Well, first there’s the quarter-life crisis,’ I say. ‘That’s like the characters on

Friends-kids freaking out that they won't get married. Twenty-year-old's. That's probably true that kids get quarter-life crises; I wouldn't know. But I know that now things work faster. Before you had to wait until you were twenty to have enough choices of things to do with your life to start getting freaked out. But now there's so much stuff for you to buy, and so ~Sped~ ways you can spend your time and joy-, and so ~Sped~ specialties that you need to get started on very early in life-like ballet, right, Joy, when did you start ballet?'

'Four.'

'Okay. I started Tae Bo at six. So, there are like- so ~Sped~ kids angling for success and so ~*Sped*~ colleges you're supposed to get into, and so ~*Sped*~ women you're supposed to have sex with-'

‘You got to freak them,’ says Joy from across the room.

‘Were we talking to you?’ Humble asks.

‘Huh, eat your salt.’

‘What, tough boy? How about I knock your head off, how would you like that-’

‘Boys.’ Joy stands up and pulls her hair away from her cheeks, which are red in addition to being cut up. Everybody shuts up.

‘So now,’ I continue, ‘instead of a quarter-life crisis they’ve got a fifth-life crisis that's when you’re eighteen and a sixth-life crisis that’s when you’re fourteen. I think that’s what a lot of kids have.’

‘What you have.’

‘Not just me. It’s the… um… should I keep going?’ ‘Yes,’ Joy says.

‘Well, there are a lot of kids who make a lot of money off the fifth- and sixth-life crises. All of a sudden they have a ton of consumers scared out of their minds and willing to buy facial cream, designer jeans, SAT test prep courses, condoms, cars, scooters, self-help books, watches, wallets, stocks, whatever … all the crap that the twenty-somethings used to buy, they now have the ten-somethings buying. They doubled their market!’

Joy has pulled up a chair next to me. ‘This kid is a freakin’ lunatic,’ he says.

‘I hope they keep him in here,’ says Humble.

‘So pretty soon.’ I keep thinking. ‘There’ll be seventh- and eighth-life crises. Then eventually a baby will be born and the doctors will look at it and wonder right away if it’s unequipped to deal with the world; if they decide it doesn’t look happy, they’ll put it on antidepressants, get it started on that particular consumer track.’

‘Hm,’ Humble says. I think he’s going to follow it up with something, but instead, he says: ‘Hm.’

Then- Like… ‘Your problem is you have a worldview informed by depression.’ He leans in. ‘What about rage?’

‘I was never big on rage.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s so much angrier in my head than it could ever be outside.’ ‘Extra cookies!’

It’s one of the nurses. We all get in line; it’s oatmeal and peanut butter. As I shuffle forward, Joy nudges me from behind; when I turn to her, she turns her face away as if I were trying to kiss her but she wouldn’t let me.

‘Your trouble,’ I say.

‘You’re silly,’ she answers.

I did it. I talked- and she liked me; she thought I was smart. I start to develop a plan. Once I get my cookies, I go to the phone to call Dad, who are already bringing Blade II tomorrow night. I want him to bring something else too.

This is your last full day at the hospital, is what I think when I get up-no

one’s taking my blood today (it’s only happened once since Sunday) so I don’t get up super-early, but I’m still the first one in the halls. I take my shower and think about how much life would suck if hot water didn’t come out of the show-ahead when you wanted. I’ve tried to take cold showers and they’re wonderful when they’re over, but during the process, they feel like some form of animal torture. But then again, that’s the point when you take a cold shower you’re supposed to get in and out as fast as possible; that’s why they do it in the army.

That’s right! Want to take a shot, soldier?

I don’t think so- Sir.

Come on, what’s the matter with you? You got a lot going for you; you don’t want to keep it going?

I need a cold shower to keep things going?

That’s right. Less time- in the shower, more on the battlefield.

Fine.

I can do this. I reach out and twist the temperature knob slowly to the left, then decide that I’m never going to get it done gradually so I’ll have to do it like a Band Aid-I jerk it over. The water goes from toasty warm to frigid so quickly that it feels like it burns me. I bend my groin out of its path, but I know that’s cheating, so I stick it back in as I furiously lather myself. Leg: up!

Down! Another leg: up! Down! Crotch: uh, scrub- scrub- scrub. Chest: wipe. Arm: down! Back! Other- arm: down! Back! Neck, face, turn around,

wash your butt, and I'm out! Straight to the towel. I wrap it around myself and shiver.

I'm so desperate to put my clothes on that my socks stick to my wet feet. I go out to talk with Paullie.

'You okay?'

'First cold shower.'

'Of the day?'

'Of my life.'

'Yeah, that'll knock yah.'

'What's the news?'

Paullie holds up his paper. It seems that a new candidate is running for Mayor of Knox promising to give everyone who votes for him a lap dance. He's a multibillionaire, and at $100 per lap

dance, he thinks he can lock up the vote. A lot of women are supporting him.

'That's crazy.' I shiver. 'It's like… Who's out there and who's in here, you know?'

'Absolutely. Better music in here, though.' Paullie turns up the radio.

'By the way, that's a question I have-can I play some music in the hall tonight? At the other end?'

'What kind?'

'There are no words, don't worry, nothing offensive. It's something one of the kids in the hall will like. Like a gift.'

'I'll have to see it first.'

'Okay. And you know I'm bringing that Blade? movie tonight to watch with the group.'

‘You think about that a minute. You’re bringing a vampire movie onto a floor full of psych patients.’

‘They can handle it.’

‘I’m not going to get any nightmares?’

‘Promise.’

‘Nightmares are a big problem in my job, Dariez.’

‘Understood.’

Paullie sighs put his paper down and gets up. ‘You want me to do your vitals?’

He straps me in on the chair, pumps me up, and puts his soft fingertips on my wrist. Today I’m 120 / 70. The first day I haven’t been perfect.

Continued: 1

‘How’re you doing?’ Dr. Ross is like.

It’s 11 A.M. I sigh. After vitals was breakfast, where the boy who was afraid of gravity and Rolling Pin Robert were gone Humble told me and Joy, that they got discharged. Toward the end of the meal, Joy touched her leg against mine for as long as it took me to drink the first sip of my after-breakfast Swee-Touch Nee tea, which was a big sip. Then Monieec announced that we’d be screening Blade II tonight opposite the smoking lounge and everybody got excited, especially Joy: ‘Huh, that movie is cool; a lotta vampires die.’ No announcements about my music, but then again it hadn’t arrived yet.

I took my Zoloft in my little plastic cup and drew some brain maps by

the window in the corner of the hall next to My-a Joy. I handled my phone messages, started thinking seriously about what I'd do the moment I got out- would I buy a cup of coffee? Walk to the park? Go home and start in on thee-mail?

-And-

That got me started thinking about e-mail, and all of a sudden, I was really glad to have Dr. Ross to go to. 'I'm doing okay, I think.'

She looks at me calmly and steadily. Maybe she's my Anchor.

'What's got you in doubt, Dariez?'

'Excuse me?'

'You said you were okay 'you think.' Why do you just think about it?'

'That's an expression,' I say.

‘This isn’t the place to be leaving if you’re not feeling better, Dariez.’

‘Right, well, I’ve been thinking about my e-mail.’

‘Yes?’

‘I’m really worried about getting out there and having to check it. The phones I’m caught up with, but the email might be pretty deadly.’

‘Deadly… How can e-mail be deadly, Dariez?’

‘Well.’ I lean back, take a deep breath. Then I remember something. ‘You know how I had a lot of problems with starting and stopping my sentences before?’

‘Yes.’

‘Not lately.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah, it’s like the opposite, like words can just pour out of me, the way they used to when I used to get in trouble in class.’ ‘Which was…’ She focuses on her pad to write this down.

‘A year ago, before- I went to Executive Pre- Professional.’

‘Right-now tell me about the e-mail.’ ‘The e-mail.’ I put my hands on the table. ‘I hate it. Like, right now, I haven’t been checking it for five days, okay?’

‘Since Saturday.’ She nods.

‘That’s right. Now, what are kids thinking while they’re trying to reach me? These are kids who probably already have some idea where I am because-

Emmah told Kristopher the number and he figured it out.’

‘Right: a big source of shame for you.’

‘Yes. But even if someone has no idea where I am, what are they thinking? Five days. They’re like: He’s crazy. He must have OD’ed or something. Everyone is expecting me to answer them instantly and I’m not able to.’

‘Who e-mails you, Dariez?’

‘Kids who want homework assignments, teachers, school clubs, announcements about charities I should volunteer in, invitations to Executive Pre-Professional football, basketball, squash games …’

‘So-o, they’re mostly school-related.’

‘They’re all school-related. My friends don’t e-mail me. They call.’

‘So why don’t you just ignore the e-mails?’

‘I can’t!’

‘Why not?’

‘Because- then kids will be offended!’

‘And- what happens then?’

‘Well, I won’t get to join clubs, get credits, participate in stuff, get extra-credit… I’ll fail.’

‘At school.’

‘Right.’ I pause. No, it’s not exactly school. It’s what comes after school. ‘At life.’

‘Ah.’ She pauses. ‘Life.’

‘Right.’

‘Failing at school is failing in life.’

‘Well… I’m in school! That’s the one thing I’m supposed to do. I know a lot of famous kids didn’t do well at school, like James Brown; he dropped out in fifth grade to be an entertainer, I respect that… but that’s not going to be me. I’m not going to be able to do anything but work as hard as possible all the Joy- and compete with everyone I know all the Joy- to make it. And right now, school’s the one thing I need to do. And I’m away from the e-mail and I can’t do it.’

‘But your definition of school isn’t one thing, it’s ~*Sped*~ different things, Dariez: extracurricular activities plus sports plus volunteering. That’s not to mention homework.’

‘Right.’

‘How anxious would you say you are about all of this, Dariez?’

I think back to what Joy said, about anxiety being a medical thing. The e-mail has been in the back of my mind since I got here, the nagging knowledge that when I get out I'll have to sit on the computer for five or six hours going through everything I've missed, answering it in reverse order because that's the way it comes in and therefore taking the longest Joy- to respond to the kids who e-mailed me in the most distant past. And then as I'm answering them more will come in, and they'll sit on top of my stack and mock me, dare me to answer them before digging down, telling me that I need them, as opposed to the one or two e-mails that are actually about something I care about. Those will get saved to the end, and by the Joy- I have the Joy- to deal with them, they'll be so out of date that I'll just have to apologize:

Sorry, boy. I haven’t been able to answer my e-mail. No, I’m not important, just incapable.

‘Dariez?’

‘Very anxious,’ I answer.

‘The e-mail anxiety, and the failure talk… These are subjects you’ve brought up before. They’re very distressing to you.’ ‘I know. I’m sweating.’

‘You are?’

‘Yeah. And I haven’t been sweating for a while.’

‘You’ve been away from your Tentacles.’

‘Right. Not anymore. Now I get to go back and they’re all right there for me.’

‘Do you remember what I asked you last Joy-, about whether or not you’d found any Anchors in here?’

‘Yes.’

She pauses. To ask a question, it is often possible for Dr. Ross only to inyoite that she might ask a question.

‘I think I’ve found one,’ I sigh.

‘What’s that?’

‘Can I get up and get it?’

‘Absolutely.’

I leave the office and walk down the hall, where Joy is leading a recruit on his welcoming tour- a black boy with wild teeth and a stained blue sweatsuit.

‘This is Dariez,’ Joy says. ‘He’s young, but he’s on the level. He does drawings.’

I shake the boy's hand. That's right. I do drawings.

'Um- Being,' the boys…

'That's his name,' Joy explains, rolling her eyes.

'Your name isn't Dariez; it's Um-Being too,' the boy says.

I nod, break the handshake, and keep walking to my room. It's literally like breaking away from a monster- the further I get from thinking about e-mail and Dr. Ross and the fact that I'm going to have to leave here and go back to Executive Preprofessional, the calmer I get. And the closer I get to the brain maps, to this little stupid thing I can do, the calmer I get. I walk past Joy-he's staring and trying to sleep- and take my art off the radiator cover. I cradle it in a

stack past Joy and Um- Being- who's now explaining how his real last name is Green and that's what he needs, some green-back into the office.

'I kind of like it in here,' I say to Dr. Ross.

'This room?'

'No, the hospital.'

'When you're finished, you can volunteer.'

'I talked to the guitar boy Neil about that. I think I'll try it. I can get school credit!'

'Is that the reason you should volunteer, Dariez-'

'No, no …' I shake my head. 'I'm just joking.' 'Ah.' Dr. Ross cuts her face

into a wide smile. ‘So, what do we have here?’

I plop them down on the table. There are two dozen now. No kind of crazy breakthroughs, just variations on a theme: pigs with brain maps that resemble Pittsburgh, my couple for Joy joined by the sweeping bridge, a family of metropolises.

‘Your artwork,’ she says.

She leaf’s through them, going ‘Oh, my’ at the particularly good ones. I constructed this stack last night-not just for Dr. Ross, for anybody. The brain maps have a certain order. Ever since I’ve been doing them, they’ve been making it clear that they should be stacked for presentation.

‘Dariez, these are wonderful.’

‘Thanks.’ I sit down. We were both standing. I didn’t even notice.

‘You started these because you used to do them when you were four?’

‘Right. Well. Something- like them.’

‘And how do they make you feel?’

I look at the pile. ‘Awesome.’

She leans in. ‘Why?’

I have to think about that one, and when Dr. Ross makes me think, I don’t get embarrassed and try to skip it. I look to the left and stroke my chin.

‘Because I do them,’ I say. ‘I do them and they’re done. It’s almost like, you know, peeing?’

‘Yes... ‘Dr. Ross nods. ‘Something you enjoy.’ ‘Right. I do it; it’s successful;

it feels good, and I know it's- good. When- I finish one of these up, I feel like I've done something and like the rest of my day can be spent doing whatever, stupid crap, email, phone calls, all the rest of it.'

'Dariez, have you ever considered the fact that you might be an artist?' 'I have other stuff too,' I keep going. What'd she says? 'First of all, I was thinking about this perpetual candle, like a candle on the ground with another candle hanging upside-down over it, and as the first candle melts the wax is kept molten by some kind of hot containment unit and gets pumped up to the second candle and drips down like a stalactite-stalagmite thing, and then I was also thinking: what if you filled a shoe with whipped cream? Just a boy's shoe, filled with whipped cream? That's pretty easy to do. And then you could keep going: a- T-shirt filled with

Jell-O, a hat full of applesauce... that's art, right? That kind of stuff. What'd you say about artists?'

She chuckles. 'You seem to enjoy what you're doing here.'

'Yeah, well, duh, it's not the most difficult thing in the world.'

'You're not sweating now.'

'This is a good Anchor for me,' I say. I admit. I admit it. It's a stupid thing to admit. It means that I'm not practical. But then again, I'm already in the loony bin; how practical am I going to get? I might have to give up on practical. 'That's right, Dariez. This can be your Anchor.' Dr. Ross stares at me and doesn't blink. I look at her face, the wall behind her, the door, the shades, the table, my hands on the table, the Brain Maps between us. I

could do the one on the top a little better. I could try putting some wood grain in there with the streets. Knots of wood in kid's heads. That could work. 'This can be my Anchor.' I nod. 'But…'

'What, Dariez?'

'What am I going to do about school? I can't go to Executive Pre-Professional for art.'

'I'm going to throw a wild notion at you.' Dr. Ross leans back, then forward. 'Have you ever thought about going to a different school?' I stare ahead. I hadn't. I honestly hadn't.

Not once, not in my whole life, not since I started there. That's my school. I worked harder to get in than I did for anything else, ever. I went there because, coming out of it, I'd be able to

be President. Or a lawyer. Rich, that's the point. Rich and successful.

And look where it got me. One stupid year-not even one, like three-quarters of one-and here I am with not one, but two bracelets on my wrist, next to a shrink in a room adjacent to a hill where there's a boy named Um- Being walking around. If I keep doing this for three more years, where will I be? I'll be a complete loser. And what if I keep on? What if I do okay, live with the depression, get into College, do College, go to Grad School, get the Job, get the Money, get Kids and a Wife and a Nice Car? What kind of crap will I be in then? I'll be completely crazy.

I don't want to be completely crazy. I don't like being here that much. I like being a little crazy: enough to

volunteer here, not enough to ever, ever, ever come back.

'Yes,' I say. 'Yes- I have thought about it.'

'When? Just now?'

I smile. 'Absolutely.'

'And what do you think?'

I clap my hands together and stand up. 'I think I should call my parents and tell them that I want to transfer to schools.' 'Visitor, Dariez,' Paullie pokes his head into the dining room. I slide my chair back from the table, where I'm playing after-lunch poker with My-a Joy and Joy and Armelio. My-a Joy doesn't have any idea how to play, but we deal him cards and he plays them face down and smiles and we give him more chips (we're using scraps of paper; the buttons

are locked up due to our recklessness) whenever he pockets his or chews them up.

'I'll be back,' I say.

'This boy, so busy,' says Armelio.

'He thinks he's all-important,' Joy says.

'I woke up, and the bed was on fire!' Says My-a Joy.

We all look at him. 'You okay, My-a Joy?' I ask. 'My mom hit me in the head. She hit me in the head with a hammer.'

'Oh, wow.' I turn to Armelio. 'I heard him say stuff like this down in the ER. Has he talked about this before?'

'No, nuh-uh, buddy.'

'Hey, My-a Joy, it's okay.' I put my hand on his shoulder. At the same

time-, I bite my tongue. You can think someone's hilarious and want to help them at the same time-.

'She hit me in the head,' he says. 'With a hammer!'

'Yeah, but you're here now,' Joy says. 'You're safe. Nobody's going to hit you in the head with anything.'

My-a Joy nods. I keep my hand on his shoulder. I keep my tongue bit down, but I make little-chuffing noises as I try to keep from laughing, and he looks up and notices. He smiles at me, then laughs himself, then picks his cards up and claps my back.

'It'll come to yah,' he says.

'That's right. I know it will.'

I excuse myself from the room and head down the hall. Right at the end

is Kristopher, holding the record I want. Dad didn't have it.

'Hey, boy,' he says sheepishly, and as I approach, he leans it against the wall. He's a dick, but I'm not perfect either so I come up and hug him.

'Hey.'

'Well, you were right. My dad had it-Italian

Masters Volume Three.'

'I so appreciate this.' I take the record. It's got a picture on the cover of what looks like the Nile at dusk, with a palm tree lilting left, echoing the brightening moon, and the purple sky rolling up from the horizon.

'Yeah, I'm sorry about everything,' Kristopher says. 'I… uh…

I've had a weird couple of days.'

'You know what?' I look him in the eyes. 'Me too.' 'I bet.' He smiles.

'Yeah, from now on, whenever crap goes down, you can be like 'Oh, Dariez, I had a bad few days', because, I will get what you're talking about.'

'What's it like in here?' He asks.

'There are kids whose lives have been screwed up for a long time, and then there are kids like me, whose lives have been screwed up for... you know... shorter.'

'Did they put you on new drugs?'

'No, same ones I was on before.'

'So-o- are you feeling better?'

'Yeah.'

‘What changed?’

‘I’m going to leave school.’

‘You’re what?’

‘I’m done. I’m going somewhere else.’

‘Where?’

‘I don’t know yet. I’m going to talk it over with my parents. Somewhere for art.’

‘You want to do art?’

‘Yeah. I’ve been doing some in here. I’m good at it.’

‘You’re pretty good at school too, boy.’

I shrug. I don’t need to explain this to Kristopher. He’s been demoted from most important friend to friend, and

he’s going to have to earn that, even. And you know what else? I don’t owe kids anything, and I don’t have to talk to them any more than I feel I need to.

‘What’s up with Emmah?’ I ask… Have to tread carefully here.

‘I got your message, about how things were bad.’

‘They got worked out. It was my fault. I got all freaked out about her being on pills and we broke up for like, a few days.’

‘Why did that freak you out?’

‘I don’t need any more of that in my life, you know? I mean, it’s bad enough with my dad.’

‘He’s on medication?’

‘Every form of medication in the book. Mom, too. And then me, with the pot… when you come right down to it, there isn’t anybody in the household who isn’t seriously drugged except the fish.’

‘And- you didn’t want your girlfriend to be, too.’

‘Her smoking is one thing; I just… I can’t explain it. I guess you’ll have to go out with someone for a long time- to understand. If you’re with somebody and then you learn that they need to … take something daily, you wonder- how good can you be for them?’

‘That’s pretty stupid,’ I say. ‘I met this girl in here-’

‘Oh yeah?’

‘Yeah, and she’s screwed up, as screwed up as me, but I don’t look at that

as an insult. I look at that as a chance to connect.'

'Yeah, well.'

'Kids are screwed up in this world. I'd rather be with someone screwed up and open about it than somebody perfect and… you know… ready to explode.'

'I'm sorry, Dariez.' Kristopher looks at me deep and holds out a hand for me to slap. 'I'm sorry I was a bitch to you.'

'You were a bitch.' I slap his hand. 'This album partly makes up for it. Just, don't do it again.' 'All right.' He nods.

We stand still a minute. We haven't moved from the crux of the hallways near the entrance of Six North.

The double doors that I came in through are eight feet behind him.

‘Well, listen,’ he says. ‘Enjoy the record. And- hey, they have a record player in here?’

‘They still smoke in here, Kristopher. They’re kind of back in time-.’

‘Enjoy it and be in touch, and I’m sorry once again. I guess you won’t be chilling for a while.’

‘I don’t know. I may never be chilling again.’

‘Did you almost kill yourself to get in here?’ Kristopher asks.

‘That’s what Emmah told me.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I wasn’t capable of dealing with the real world.’

‘Dariez, don’t kill yourself, okay?’

‘Thanks.’

‘Just… don’t.’

‘I won’t.’

‘I’ll see you soon, boy.’

Kristopher turns, and the nurses open the door for him. He’s not a bad boy. He’s just someone who hasn’t had his stay on Six North yet. I take the record to Paullie to store behind the nurses ‘station.

Six North doesn’t need a PA system, because of President Armelio, but it does have one, used regularly for the simple and rhythmic messages of ‘Lunch is served,’ ‘Medication,’ and ‘All smokers to the smoking lounge; smokers, get your

smokes.' This afternoon it pipes up with a longer message, courtesy of Monieec.

'Ladies and gentlemen, this afternoon our patient Dariez Gilner, who is leaving tomorrow, is going to be drawing his artwork for everyone on the floor. If you'd like your piece of Dariez's art, come to the end of the hallway by the dining room.

End of the dining-room hallway, five minutes. Have fun!'

I sit down in the back most chair, by the window that peers out over the avenue that crosses the street I live on, so close to my real life. I look over at my conference chair where I meet with my parents and Joy. I have a second chair set up in front of me as an art desk, with stacks of board games on it and a

chessboard on top. It’s a little flimsy, but it’ll do.

President Armelio is the first to approach. He strides up, barrel-chested and sure of himself, like a torpedo. ‘Hey, buddy, this is great! You going to make me one of your heads with the maps inside?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Well let’s go, buddy. I isn't got all day!’

Right. Armelio is going to have to be done fast because he is fast. I sketch the outline of his head and shoulders without a second thought and start in on his brain map. Highways, that’s what Armelio has in his head-six-lane highways running parallel, streaking through a city, with purpose and minimal on-ramps. He

doesn’t have any quiet little streets or parks; it’s highways and a grid, and no rivers either.

The highways hardly even connect because- Armelio doesn’t mix up his thoughts; he has one and does it and then he moves on to the next. It’s a great way to live. Especially when the biggest thought is wanting to play cards. Cards have to be represented in Armelio’s brain somewhere. So, I sketch some streets into an ace of spades right in the middle- it’s not a great ace of spades, but Armelio gets it.

‘Spades! Buddy, I crush you in spades.’

I put my initials on it, big and bold, ‘CG’ like ‘computer-generated.’

‘I’m going to keep this, for real,’ Armelio says. ‘You a good boy, Dariez.’ He shakes my hand. ‘You want my number for when you go?’

‘Sure-’ I take out a piece of paper.

‘It’s an adult home,’ Armelio says. ‘You’re going to have to ask for Spyros, which is my other name.’ He gives me the number and moves aside, and there’s Ebony, with her cane and her velvet pants, smacking her lips.

‘I heard… that you were making your brains for kids,’ she says.

‘That’s right! And you know who the first person who said they were brains was?’

‘Me!’

‘Absolutely. Now, look’ -I gesture at my stack of work on the floor- ’now I’ve got all this.’

‘So-o- I get paid, right?’ Ebony laughs.

‘Not quite; I haven’t made it yet. As an artist.’

‘I know. It’s tough.’

‘So-o- you just get a brain map for yourself, okay?’

‘Good!’

I trace her head freehand, looking at her, not the paper. I look down and it’s pretty good. Ebony’s brain … what’s in there? A lot of circles, for all the buttons she stole. She was a nut with those buttons. Didn’t mess around. Quite a schemer. And with all of her gambling skills, she needs to have a Strip, like

Vegas. So-o- I get a big boulevard in the middle and lots of traffic circles around it, with circular parks, circular malls, little circle lakes. It comes out looking less like a city and more like a necklace with a central band and tons of bunched-up jewels hanging off.

'It's pretty!' She says.

'And you're done.' I hand it to her.

'You like doing these, huh?'

'Yeah. It helps, you know… with my depression. I came in here with depression.'

'Imagine having depression when you were eleven years old,' Ebony says. 'If all my children were in this hall, this hall would be full up, I tell you.'

‘You have kids?’ I ask, keeping my voice down.

‘I had thirteen miscarriages,’ she says. ‘Imagine that.’ And she looks at me without any of the humor or attitude that she usually puts on, just with big wide eyes and empty questions.

‘I’m so sorry,’ I say.

‘I know. I know you are. That’s the thing.’

Ebony shuffles away showing off her portrait (‘That’s me! See? Me!’) She doesn’t leave a phone number. Humble is next.

‘All right, boy, what kind of scam you got going on here?’

‘It’s nothing.’ I start in on Humble’s bald head. Bald heads are easy. You know, if I had to right now, I think I

could handle the lower tip of Knox. I look at

Humble. He raises his eyebrows at me. ‘Make me look good, all right?’

I laugh- inside Humble’s head is industrial chaos.

I don’t make any small blocks, just big ones-the kind of blocks where you’d find lumber shops and factories and bars where Humble would hang out and work. I put the ocean in there, to represent his hometown, Bensonhurst, which borders the ocean, where he hooked up with all those girls way back when. Then I splash it with highways, erasing the streets and putting them over the top, throwing in crazy interchanges for no reason, making the whole thing look violent and random, but also powerful and true-the kind of mind that

could come up with some great stuff if you harnessed it right. When I'm done, I look up.

'I guess it's okay.' He shrugs.

I chuckle. 'Thanks, Humble.'

'I want you to remember me,' he says. 'No joke. When you're a big-time-artist or whatever, you got to invite me to one of the parties.'

'It's a deal,' I say. 'But how am I going to be in touch?'

'Oh, right-I got a number!' Humble says. 'I'm going to be staying in Seaside Paradise; it's the same home that Armelio is going to, but I'm going to be on a different floor.' He gives me the number; I put it on the same sheet as Armelio's.

‘You’re not going to be in touch,’ Humble says.

‘I will,’ I say.

‘No, you won’t; I can tell. But it’s okay. You have a lot going for you. Just don’t burn out again.’ We shake hands. Up next is

Joy. ‘Hey, girl!’

‘Don’t you dare start calling me that? This is very nice of you to do.’

‘Least I could do. They’re all such cool kids.’

‘You’re like a celebrity now. Everyone wants to know if I’m your girlfriend.’

‘And what do you tell them?’

‘’No!’ And then I walk away.’

‘Good call.’

‘So-o- what are you trying to pull? You already made one of these for me. You just said it wasn’t finished.’

I pull out the one I made for her, with the boy and girl connected by the bridge, and write my phone number on the back of it.

‘Oh my gosh.’

‘Now it’s done.’ I smile, standing up. I lean in and whisper: ‘It took me like twice as long as any of the others. And I’ll make you an even better one when I get out-’

She pushes me away. ‘Yeah, like I want your stupid art.’

‘You do.’ I lean back. ‘I saw how you looked at it before.’

‘I’ll keep it to make you feel good,’ she says. ‘That’s it.’

‘Fine.’ She leans in and kisses my cheek. ‘Thank you, for real.’

‘You’re welcome. Hey, what are you doing tonight?’ ‘Well… I thought I’d be hanging out in the psych hospital. What about you?’

‘I’ve got big plans,’ I say. ‘We’ve got a movie coming in-’

‘Right, I’m not seeing that stupid movie.’

‘I know.’ I drop to a whisper. ‘But when it’s halfway done, do you want to meet in my room?’

‘You’re kidding.’

‘No. Seriously.’

‘Your roommate will be there! He’s always there!’

‘Trust me. Come to the room.’

‘Are you going to try and make out with me?’

‘If you must know? Yes.’

‘I appreciate your honesty. We’ll see.’

I hug her; she holds the brain map with her hands wrapped around me. ‘And I already have your number,’ I say.

‘You don’t get any second chances if you lose it,’ she says. ‘I don’t give that number out twice.’

I take a quick wanting look at her as we pull away from each other and she moves off to the side.

Joy is next.

‘Who’s that behind you?’

‘Huh, who do you think?’ Joy answers.

‘Come on up together, boys. I’ll do you both at once.’ ‘Cool,’ Joy says, standing off to the side. Joy stands next to him and I start drawing them, their shaggy hair and baggy clothing making for great outlines.

‘So-o- he’s drawing us?’ Joy asks Joy.

‘Be quiet, all right?’

‘Where did you boys hang out?’ I ask Joy, not looking up from the paper. ‘Back when you were garbage-heads?’

‘What? You’re going to draw that?’

‘No.’ I look up. ‘I’m just curious. What neighborhood?’

‘It was the Lower East Side, but don’t draw the Lower East Side,’ says Joy. ‘I don’t want to go back there.’

‘All right, fair enough. Where do you want to live?’ ‘On the Upper East Side, with all the rich kids,’ Joy answers.

‘Huh, me too,’ says Joy.

‘Wait, no, you’re getting a guitar,’ I say.

‘Oh, cool.’

I start on Joy’s and Joy’s brains. With Joy, it’s fun to do a guitar in a street grid-some diagonal streets meeting for the body and then a big wide boulevard for the neck, a park for the head. Then I turn to Joy. I know the Upper East Side pretty well; it’s in Knox and the big thing

that it has is Central Park, so I draw that on the inside left of his head. Then I put in the stately grid of rich streets. I know the

Guggenheim Museum is somewhere up there; I mark that with an arrow and then I put an ‘X’ right next to it, on a corner where an apartment probably costs $20 million, and write Joy’s pad. ‘Joy’s pad! That’s right! That’s where I’m headed.’ He raises his arms. ‘Moving on up.’ ‘Enjoy.’ I hand them the piece.

‘Who gets what?’ Joy asks. ‘You want us to rip it apart?’

‘No, boy, we’re supposed to keep it together because we’re friends,’ says Joy. ‘I’ll make a photocopy.’

‘Where’s the photocopy machine in here?’

‘There isn’t one! I’ll do it when I get out.’

‘Where’s that going to leave me?’

‘With a copy!’

‘I don’t want a copy!’

‘Would you listen to this boy? Nothing’s good enough for him-’

‘Hey, Joy,’ I interrupt. ‘Anyway, I can get yours and Joy’s phone numbers to talk to you after you leave?’

Joy starts to say something, but she leans in and stops him:

‘It’s not a good idea, Dariez.’

‘What? Why?’

He sighs. ‘I’ve been in and out of this place a lot, right?’

‘Yeah.’

‘There are good things about this place; I mean, the food is the best around; there are good kids here… but it’s still not a place to meet kids.’

‘Why not? I met you boys and you’re cool!’ ‘Yeah, well, all the worse, then, when you try to call me or team up and find out that we’ve OD’ed, or been shot, or come back here even worse, or just disappeared.’

‘That’s a pretty negative view.’

‘I’ve seen it before. You just remember us, okay? We meet in the outside world; it just ruins it. You’ll be embarrassed by me and me… ‘He smiles. ‘… I might be embarrassed by me, too.

And I might be embarrassed by you if you don't keep your stuff together.'

'Thanks. You sure no numbers?'

Joy shakes my hand. 'If we need to, we'll meet.'

Joy shakes my hand. 'What he said.' The last boy in line is My-a Joy.

'I tell you, what'd I say? You play those numbers-' 'It'll come to Ya!' I answer.

'It the truth!' He grins.

Ah, My-a Joy. What's in My-a Joy's brain? Chaos. I do up his nearly bald head and shoulders and then start putting the most complicated, unnecessary, wild highways through him from ear to ear. I connect them in intricate spaghetti ramps. In one nexus, five highways meet; I have to erase and redraw the ramps a

few times. Then I put in the grid-a grid laid out by a hyperactive designer, with blocks going in all different directions.

When My-a Joy's brain map is done it might look like the best-a catalog of a schizophrenic mind, but one that works somehow.

'Here you go,' I tell him. He's sitting in a seat that he took next to me to watch me work.

'It'll come to Ya!' he says and takes the map. I want him to finally open up, to call me Dariez, to tell me that we came in together, but he's still My-a Joy- his vocabulary is still limited.

We sit back in our respective chairs; I doze off a bit. Making art on devoid is tiring. But the last thing I see before I go to sleep is My-a Joy unfolding

his brain map next to me and comparing it with Ebony, who says, of course, hers is a lot prettier. That's not a bad thing to go to sleep to.

'Dariez, are you okay?' Mom asks. I jolt up and I have a momentary seizure that it was all a dream, all of it-the whole Sixth North bit-but then I wonder, where would the dream start? If it were a nightmare, it would have to have started somewhere before, I got bad; it would be like a yearlong dream. You don't have those. And if it were a good dream, that would mean I was still back where it started, leaning over my parents' toilet or lying in bed listening to my heart. I didn't need that. 'Yeah! I'm-whoa.' I sit up. They're all there- Dad, Mom, Sarah.

'Are you forcing yourself to sleep?' Mom asks. 'Are you depressed?'

‘Are you on drugs?’ Sarah asks. ‘Can you hear me?’

‘I was taking a nap! Jeez!’

‘Oh, okay. It’s at six o’clock.’

‘Wow, I was asleep for a while. I was drawing my brain maps for kids.’

‘Oh, boy,’ says Dad. ‘This doesn’t sound good.’ ‘What are brain maps?’ Sarah asks.

‘That’s her art,’ says Mom. ‘This is why he wants to change schools. Making this art makes you happy, right Dariez?’

‘Yeah, want to see?’

‘Absolutely.’

I take the stack from beside me and pass it around. This is really what I was creating the stack for, I think; to

show my parents. ‘Some of the best were the ones I just did, for the patients.’ ‘Very original,’ Dad says.

‘I like this one,’ says Sarah, pointing at the pig with quasi- Pittsburgh inside him.

‘You put a lot of time- into these, I see,’ Mom says.

‘Right, that’s the thing: they don’t take me much time-,’ I explain. ‘I’m starting to get a little bored of them, actually; I want to move to something else.’ ‘So how are you feeling, Dariez?’ Dad puts the stack back on the floor.

‘You look a lot better,’ Mom says.

‘I do?’

‘Yeah,’ Sarah says. ‘You don’t look all freaky as much.’

‘I used to look freaky?’

‘She doesn’t mean freaky,’’ Mom tells us both. ‘She just means that when you were down, you looked a little under the weather.

Isn’t that right, Sarah?’

‘No, he looked freaky.’

‘A flat affect, that’s what the doctors call it.’ I smile. ‘Right, well you don’t have that as much anymore,’ Sarah says.

‘So-o- you want to quit school?’ Dad brings us back to the real deal stuff.

‘I don’t want to quit.’ I turn to him. ‘I want to transfer.’

‘But that means quitting the school you’re currently at-’

‘He can’t handle the other school!’ Sarah says. ‘Look at-’

‘Hold on a second. I can talk,’ I say. ‘Boys.’ I look at all three of them in turn. ‘One thing that they do in here gives you a lot of time- to think. I can’t explain it; once you come in, time- just slows down-’

‘Well, you don’t have any interruptions, that’s probably it-’

‘Also, I think the clocks are a little off-’

I wave my hand. ‘Point is, you have time- to think about how you got here. Because obviously, nobody wants to come back. I don’t want to come back’

‘Good. Me neither,’ says Dad. ‘What I said the last time-, about actually wanting to be here; that was a joke.’

‘Right. Hey, did you bring the movie?’

‘Of course. I can watch some of it with you, right?’

‘Absolutely. So anyway, I’ve been thinking about when things started getting bad for me. I realized: it started after I got into high school.’ ‘Uh-huh,’ Mom says.

‘That was the happiest moment of my life. The happiest day. And from there on it was all downhill.’ ‘Right, this happens to a lot of adults,’ Dad says. ‘Will you stop interrupting him?’ Sarah interrupts. Dad folds his hands behind him and straightens his back.

‘It’s okay, Sarah. I just… I think I was concentrated on getting into Executive Pre-Professional because it was

like, a challenge. I wanted to have that feeling of triumph. I never really thought about the fact that I'd have to, you know, go to the school.'

'So, you want to do art,' Mom says.

'Well, let's consider it. I never really liked math. I was good at it, but only because I liked having basic information in front of me to get through, to reach that feeling of accomplishment. I never really liked English. This'- I point at the brain maps- 'this is something different. This is something I love. So, I'd better do it.'

'You'd better love it,' Dad says. 'Because it's a hard life. It's mostly the artists who end up in places like this.'

‘Well, then he has to be an artist; that’s where he is!’ Sarah says.

‘Heh. It’s pretty simple.’ I stand up. ‘Take a look around. I tried to go to the best high school in the city.

And this is where I ended up.’

‘True.’ Mom looks behind her. Solomon rushes across our field of view.

‘If I don’t make some kind of big change, I’m going to come out of here wondering how anything is different from before, and I’m going to end up right back here.’

‘Right,’ says Mom. ‘I’m with you, Dariez.’

‘What art school are you going to go to?’ Dad asks. ‘Knox

Arts Academy? It’s easy to transfer to with my grades-’

‘Oh, but Dariez, that’s the school for kids who are all screwed up,’ Dad says.

I look at him. ‘Yeah? Dad?’ I raise my wrist, show him the bracelets. I have pride in them now. They’re true, and kids can’t screw with them. And when you say the truth you get stronger.

Dad stands still for a minute, looks down at his feet, and then looks up. ‘Okay,’ he says. ‘We’ll do whatever we have to do.

You have to stay in school until you transfer, though.

That’s going to be… until the end of the year at least, I think.’

‘I’ll handle it,’ I say.

‘I know you will. We’ll help.’

‘Dinner, get ready for dinner!’ President Armelio walks toward us. ‘Dariez and his family, dinner is almost here!’

‘How’ve you been eating?’ Mom asks as I stretch my legs.

‘I have been. That’s good.’

‘It’s wonderful, Dariez.’

‘Okay, so I’m leaving the DVD here with you.’ Dad hands it to me. ‘And I’m going to be back to watch it when you’re done with dinner. When will that be?’

‘Seven is good. But visiting hours end at eight. You won’t get to watch the whole thing.’

‘We’ll see how long I can stay. You might be surprised.’

I swallow. I don’t want him sticking around that long.

I’ll make sure Paullie gets him out.

‘I’ll see you tomorrow,’ Mom says. ‘The staff tells us we’re picking you up early in the morning before I go to work.’ ‘I’ll be ready.’

‘We’ve got lots of good food at home.’

‘I’ll see you when I come home from school.’ Sarah hugs my waist. ‘I’m so happy you’re back.’ I pat her head. ‘Are you embarrassed by this place?’

‘Yeah, but whatever.’

‘I am too,’ I say. ‘It’s just a good type of embarrassment.’

Mom and Dad are dressed up to bring me out; I’m wearing what I wore all the time- in here-some khaki pants and my tie-dyed T-shirt and my dress shoes, my Rockport’s, the ones that kids complimented me on every so often, that made me feel like a professional patient. Mom never brought a change of clothes.

They’re here early because Dad has to work; he wanted to see me before he left. Mom is staying home today to see that I’m all right. Then, tomorrow, Friday, I’m back at school, but with the official notice that I can pop into the nurse’s office at any time- if I feel depressed. I don’t have to go to class for the next week; that’s school policy. I’m

encouraged to go but they don’t want to overwhelm me. It’s a good deal.

It’s 7:45 A.M. I’ve taken my last vitals-120 / 80- and I’m standing at the crux of the hall by the nurses ‘office, looking at the double doors I came in five days ago. It seems like five days; it doesn’t seem too long or too short; it seems like I spent the Bliss- here that I spent. Kids are always talking about really- shocking quotes, really- information, really- news-but in here I think I had really- REALLY-. Armelio shakes my hand a final time-.

‘Good luck, buddy.’

Humble says I should stay for a little longer.

‘You’re going to lose it on the outside, boy.’

Joy mumbles at me. It’s too early for him. The Professor tells me to keep doing my art.

Paullie says he heard from Neil that I was thinking of volunteering and he hopes to see me sometimes.

My-a Joy ignores me completely.

Ebony says to be careful of liars and cheats and to always respect children.

Joy pops out of her room at 7:50, just as breakfast is rolling in and my parents are stepping out of the nurses' office where they were signing papers. ‘I’m out in the afternoon,’ she says. She’s wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt. ‘Call me tonight?’ ‘Sure.’ I touch her number in my pocket, next to her two notes that I saved.

‘How are you feeling?’

‘I’m feeling like I can handle it.’

‘Me too.’

‘You’re a cool girl,’ I say.

‘Your kind of a dork, but with potential,’ she says.

‘That’s all I’m trying for.’
‘Dariez?’ Mom asks.

‘Oh, hey boys, ah, this is Joy. We got to be friends here.’ ‘I saw you last night,’ Dad says, shaking her hand.

‘A pleasure to meet you,’ says Mom. Neither of them takes a second look at the cuts on her face. My parents have some class.

‘Good to meet you too,’ she says.

‘Are you still in high school?’ Dad asks.

‘Delfin,’ she says.

‘A lot of pressure, huh,’ says Mom.

‘Yeah.’

‘I think they might have to change the whole system. Look, two kids like you, smart young kids, sent in here because of pressure.’

‘Mom.’

‘I’m serious. I’m going to write to my congressperson about it.’ ‘Mom.’

‘I’ll go,’ Joy says. ‘See you Dariez.’ And she dips her leg up behind her as she turns away and flicks a wave at me-that counts as a kiss, I think. If my parents weren’t here that would be a kiss.

‘Are you ready?’ Mom asks.

‘Yeah. Bye, everybody!’

‘Wait!’ From down the hall, Joy moves forward as fast as he allows himself to, which isn’t very fast, sort of like a speed walk, and hands me the record.

‘Thank you, Dariez. This boy, your son,’ he turns to my parents, ‘he has helped me.’

‘Thank you,’ Mom and Dad say.

I hug Joy and take in his smell one last time-.

‘Good luck, boy.’

‘As you go through life, you think of me and hope that

I am better.’

‘I will.’

We separate and Joy migrates toward the dining room and the smell of food.

I look at my parents. ‘Let’s go.’

It’s incredibly simple. The nurses open the doors for us and there I am outside, looking at the ‘Sh-h! Healing in Progress’ poster I saw when I came in. The bank of elevators stands sentry in front of us.

‘Girls,’ I tell them. ‘Can you go home yourselves, and I’ll walk after you in like one minute?’

‘Why? Are you okay?’

‘I just want to walk by myself a little.’

‘Think things over?’

‘Yeah.’

‘You’re not feeling… bad?’

‘No. I just want to walk home myself.’

‘We’ll take your stuff.’ They grab the bag of old clothes and art I had with me, plus the record; wave, and take the next elevator down.

I wait for thirty seconds before hitting the button myself.

I’m not better, you know. The weight hasn’t left my head. I feel how easily I could fall back into it, lie down and not eat, waste my time- and curse wasting my Joy-, look at my homework and freak out and go and chill at Kristopher’s, look at Emmah and be jealous again, take the subway home and

hope that it has an accident, go and get my bike and head to the Kinzua Bridge. All of that is still there. The only thing is, it's not an option now. It's just… a possibility like it's a possibility that I could turn to dust in the next instant and be disseminated throughout the universe as an omniscient consciousness. It's not a very likely possibility.

I get in the elevator. It's big and shiny. There's a lot to look at in the real world.

I don't know what I'm going to do today, still. I'm probably going to go home, sort through my art, and then call everybody I know and tell them that I'm going to be switching schools and from now on they should reach me by phone instead of e-mail.

But I also might go to the park- how come I never go to the park?

…And throw a ball around with whatever kids are out there. Or a Frisbee. It's a real day outside. There's actual weather out there.

I walk through the lobby. The smells! Coffee and muffins and flowers and scented candles from the gift shop. Why does UMPC Hospital have a gift shop? I guess everybody has to have a gift shop.

I step out onto the sidewalk.

I'm a free boy. Well, I'm a minor, but one-quarter of your life is spent as a minor; you might as well make the best of it. I'm a free minor.

I breathe. It’s a spring day. The air is like a sheet billowing down on me in slow motion.

Try drawing a naked person. Try drawing Joy naked. Travel.

Fly. Swim. Meet. Love. Dance. Win. Smile. Laugh. Hold. Walk.

Skip. Okay, it’s gay, whatever, skip.

Ski- Sled. Play basketball. Jog. Run. Run. Run. Run home.

Run home and enjoy it. Enjoy. Take these verbs and enjoy them.

They’re yours, Dariez. You deserve them because you chose them.

You could have left them all behind, but you chose to stay here.

So now live for real, Dariez. Live. Live. Live. Live.

Live.

‘What up, son? Did you get in?!’

‘Yeah.’

‘Allriiiiight! ‘

‘Hooooo-ee! ‘

‘Biyatch!’

‘That’s right!’

‘But you studied. I didn’t study at all,’ he was like.

‘True. I should feel lucky to talk to you. You’re kind of like Hercules.’

‘Yeah, cleaning the stables. I’m having a party.’

‘When? Tonight?’

‘Yup. My parents are away. I have the whole house. You’re coming, right?’

‘A real party? Without a cake?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘Sure!’ I was in eighth grade and I had gotten into high school and I was going to a party? I was set for life! ‘Can you bring any booze?’

‘Like drinks?’

‘Dariez, come on. Yes. Can you bring?’

‘I don’t have ID.’

‘Dariez, none of us have ID! I mean, can you take some off your parents?’

‘I don’t think they have any…’ But I knew that wasn’t true.

‘They have something.’

I held my hand over my cell, so Mom wouldn’t hear.

‘Scotch. They have a bottle of scotch.’

‘What kind?’

‘Jeez, dude, I don’t know.’

‘Well, bring it. Can you call any girls?’

I had been in my room studying for a year. ‘No.’

‘That’s all right, I’ll bring the girls. You want to at least help me set up?’

‘Sure!’

‘Get over here.’

‘I’m going to Kristopher’s house!’ I announced to Mom, flipping my phone shut. I still had the welcome packet in my hand; I gave it to her to put in my room. ‘What are you going to do over there?’ she asked, beaming at the packet, then at me.

‘Um… sleepover.’

‘Are you going to celebrate? Because you should celebrate it.’

‘Heh. Yeah.’

‘Dariez, I’m being honest, I’ve never seen someone work as hard as you did getting into this school. You deserve a little break and you deserve to feel proud of yourself. You’re gifted, and the world is taking notice. This is the first step in an amazing journey-’

‘Okay, Mom, please.’ I hugged her.

I grabbed my coat and sat at the kitchen table, pretending to text on the phone. When Mom left the room, I invaded the cabinet above the sink, took out the one bottle of scotch (Glenlivet,) and fetched from the back of the cupboard the thermos that I used to use for grade-school lunches. That would seem cool at the party. I poured some scotch in and I put a little water back in the scotch, in case they checked levels, and stuffed the thermos in my big jacket pocket before leaving the house and calling back to Mom that I would call her later.

I took the subway to Kristopher’s without a book to study for my lap-first time- in a year. At his stop, I bounded up

the stairs into the gray streets, slipped into his building, nodded to the doorman to call up, and squished my thumb on the elevator button, giving it a twist and some flair. On the sixteenth floor was Kristopher, holding his front door open, rap music about killing kids on in the background, holding his metal cigarette out for me.

‘Smoke. Celebrate.’ I stopped.

‘If anything's the Joy of time-, it’s now.’ I nodded.

‘Come in, I’ll show you.’ Kristopher brought me into his house and sat me on his couch and demonstrated how to hold the cigarette, so the metal wouldn’t burn me. He explained how you have to take the smoke into your lungs, not your stomach- ‘Don’t swallow it, Dariez, that’s how hits get lost’- and how

to let it go as slowly as you could through your mouth or nose. The key was to hold it in as long as possible. But you didn't want to hold it too long.

Then you coughed.

'How do I light it?' I asked.

'I'll light it for you,' Kristopher was like. He knelt in front of me on the couch-I took a look at his living room, fenced in with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, filled up with a coffee table, a tall fluted ashtray, a porcelain dog, and a small electric piano- trying to remember how it all looked in case it changed later. The only thing I had done- that kids said was kind of like smoking pot was go- really hard on the swings, and Kristopher had told me that anyone who said that was probably high when they were on the swings.

The butane flame went up.

I sucked in on the metal cigarette as if a doctor were telling me to.

My mouth filled up with the taste that I knew so well from Kristopher's room-a a chemical taste, buzzy, and light. I looked him in the eyes with my cheeks puffed out. He clipped the flame, smiling.

'Not in your cheeks!' he said. 'You look like Dizzy Gillespie!

In your lungs! Put it in your lungs.'

I worked with new muscles. The smoke in me felt like a blob of clay.

'That's it, hold it, hold it…'

My eyes started watering, getting hot.

'Hold it. Hold it. You want more?'

I shook my head, terrified. Kristopher laughed.

‘Okay. Dude, you’re good. You’re good, dude!’ Pfffffflt. I blew it all in Kristopher’s face.

‘Jesus! Boy, that was big!’ Kristopher swatted at the cloud that came out of me. ‘You sure you haven’t done this before?’

I panted, breathing in air that still had the smoke in it.

‘What’s going to happen?’ I asked.

‘Probably nothing.’ Kristopher stood up, took his cigarette back, put it in the stand-up ashtray. Then he reached down with his hand out-I expected a handshake, but he pulled me off the couch.

‘Congratulations.’

We hugged mouth to ear. It was a boy hug, complete with slapping. I leaned back and smiled at him as I clasped his arms.

‘You too, boy. It’s going to be great.’

‘I’m-a tell you what’s going to be great: this party,’ Kristopher said, and he began pacing, counting on his fingers. ‘I need for you to go and get some seltzer, for spritzers. Also, we got to put away all of my dad’s books and writing so it doesn’t get damaged. Also, call this girl; her dad threatened to call the cops if I called again; say you’re with Greenpeace.’

‘I’m not going to remember this; hold on,’ I said, taking an index card from Kristopher’s coffee table. I was

numbering it with a Sharpie, from one, when the weed hit me.

‘Whoa- Wow.’

‘Uh-oh,’ Kristopher said. He looked up.

‘Whoa.’ ‘You are feeling it?’

Is my brain falling out of my head? I thought.

I looked down at the index card that said 1) get seltzer, and 1) get seltzer twisted back as if it had decided to fall off the card. I looked up at Kristopher’s bookshelves and they looked the same, but as I turned, they moved in frames. It wasn’t like the slowness that came from being underwater; it was like I was under air-thick and heavy air that had decided to follow me. For being high, it felt pretty heavy.

‘You are feeling it?’ Kristopher repeated.

I looked at his stand-up ashtray, filled with crumpled cigarettes and the one clear, shining metal cigarette.

‘It’s like the king of the cigarette butts!’ I said.

‘Oh, boy,’ Kristopher was like. ‘Dariez- are you going to be able to do the stuff for the party?’

Was I? I was able to do anything. Here I was making clever statements like ‘king of the cigarette butts;’ if I went outside, there was no telling what I would be capable of.

‘What’s first?’ I asked.

Kristopher gave me a few bucks to get the seltzer, but just as I was

opening the door to go out into the world, his buzzer rang.

‘It’s Emmah,’ Kristopher said, leaping to the closed-circuit phone in his kitchen, which was full of grapefruits and dark wood cabinets.

‘She’s coming?’ I asked.

Emmah was in our class; she was half Chinese and half Jewish; she dressed well. Every day she came in with something different-a chain of Sponge Bob Burger King toys strung around her neck; one asymmetrical, giant, red-plastic hoop earring; black clown circles on her cheeks. I think her accessories were a courtesy meant to distract from her small, lucrative body and baby-doll face. If she let it all go natural, if she just let her hair swing down the way it would have if she’d

grown up in a field with the wind, she'd make all us boys explode.

'Emmah's pretty hot, huh,' Kristopher said, hanging up the phone.

'She's okay.'

We sat watching the door like we were waiting for the mama bird to bring us food. She knocked.

'He*yyyy*,' Kristopher called, beating me.

'Hi!' I said. We rushed to the doorknob; Kristopher gave a look, pulled it toward him, and there she was in a green dress with a rainbow of fuzzy anklets on one leg. Her eyes were so big and dark that she seemed even more tiny and spindly, on high-heeled shoes that threw her forward at us and made her dress outline her little breasts.

‘Boys,’ she said. ‘I think someone has been smoking pah-at.’

‘No way,’ Kristopher said.

‘My friends are coming. When’s the party starting?’

‘Five minutes ago,’ Kristopher said. ‘You want to play Scrabble?’

‘Scrabble!’ Emmah put her bag down-it was shaped like a hippo. ‘Who plays Scrabble?’

‘Well, I do, duh, and Dariez does, too’-I didn’t, actually-’ and we’re some smart boys, seeing as we got in.’

‘I heard!’ Emmah grabbed her hippo bag and hit Kristopher with it. ‘I did too!’ As an afterthought, she hit me.

‘Congratulations!’

‘Group hug!’ Kristopher announced, and we got together, a tiered threesome-Emmah’s head came up to my chin; my head came up to Kristopher’s chin. I put my hand around Emmah’s waist and felt her warmth and how narrow she was. Her palm curled around my shoulder. We pushed our torsos together in a sort of ballet. I could feel Emmah’s breath between us. I turned to look-

‘Scrabble,’ Kristopher said. He went across the living room, took it out of one of the bookshelves. He put it on the floor and we sat, Kristopher between me and Emmah, the ashtray taking up the fourth spot.

‘House rules,’ Kristopher said as he flipped over the tiles. ‘If you don’t have any words to put on the board, you can

make a word up, as long as you have an actual definition of that word in your head. If your definition makes the other kids laugh, you get the points, but otherwise, you lose that ~*Sped*~ points.'

'We can make up words?' I asked. This was brimming with possibilities. I could make up Emmahed-what happens when Emmah touches you, you get Emma had. That would make her laugh. Or not.

'What about Chinese words?' Emmah asked.

'You have to know what they mean and be able to explain them.'

'Oh. That shouldn't be a problem.' She smiled wickedly.

'Who's going first?'

'Can we smoke?'

‘So, decoding.’ Kristopher gave her the metal cigarettes-I said no this time-; I’d had enough.

For her first word, Emmah put down M-U-W-L-I.

‘What is that?’ I asked.

‘Chinese word.’

‘What’s it mean?’

‘Uh, cat.’

‘That’s ridiculous. How do we know if muwli is real?’ I turned to Kristopher.

He shrugged. ‘Benefit of the doubt?’

Emmah stuck out her tongue at me and damn it was a cute tongue. Is that a ring? I thought- can’t be. Wait-it’s gone.

‘I swear.’ she said. ‘‘Come here, little mule!’ See?’ ‘I’m checking you on your next one,’ I said.

‘The Internet’s over there.’ Kristopher was like.

‘But while you’re gone, we’re going to give you all consonants.’ Emmah smiled.

‘Is it my go?’ I put down M-O-P off M-U-W-L-I. Ten points.

Kristopher put down S-M-A-P off M-O-P. ‘That’s a cross between a smack and a slap. Like, ‘I’m-a snap you.’’ Emmah laughed and laughed. I chuckled even though I didn’t want to.

Kristopher got the points. Emmah put down T-R-I-I-L.

‘What is that?’ I asked.

‘It’s a thrill, you know, like a trill on the flute, except the first L is lowercase and the second is uppercase!’

‘That's not trilling, that’s ‘tree-eel’!’

‘Okay, fine.’ She switched the letters. Now it said T-RI-L-I.

‘Trill-ee! What is tril-hee?’

‘An unmentionable act.’

Kristopher laughed so hard that he just had to ease his body into Emmah’s, leaning on her shoulder. She pushed back, tilting her flank into him.

I saw where this was going. I made eye contact with Emmah and here’s what her eyes said: Dariez, we’re all headed to the same school. I’m going to need a boyfriend going in, to give me

some stability, a little bit of backup, you know?

Nothing serious. You're cool, but you're not as cool as Kristopher. He has a pot and he's so much more laid back than you; you spent the last year studying for this test; he didn't lift a finger for it.

That means he's smarter than you. Not that you're not smart, but intelligence is very important in a boy- it is the most important thing, up there with a sense of humor. And he has a better sense of humor than you, too. It doesn't hurt that he's taller. So, I'll be your friend, but right now let's let this develop. And don't be jealous.

That would be a waste of everybody's Joy-.

We kept playing. Kristopher and Emmah moved closer until their knees touched, and I could only imagine the energy that was going through those knees. I thought maybe they were going to lean in for a first kiss (or a second? No, Kristopher would have told me) right in front of me when the buzzer rang again.

It was Emmah's friend Cookie. She had brought bottles of beer.

We took ten minutes to open them, eventually hitting them against Kristopher's kitchen countertop edge, to work the tops off. Then Emmah said Cookie should've gotten twist-offs, and she asked what twist-offs were, and we all laughed. Cookie had blond hair and glitter all over her neck. She hadn't gotten into Executive Preprofessional, but that was okay because she was going to high

school in Canada. The boy down at the local bodega let her buy beer if she leaned over the counter- she had developed early and had the kind of massive alluring breasts that moved in reverse rhythm when she walked.

We put Scrabble away-nobody won. The rap music seemed to be hooked up to some sort of Internet-capable playlist and kept going, never repeating, as more and more guests arrived. There was Anna-she was on Ritalin and snorted it off her little cosmetic mirror before tests; Paul-he was nationally ranked in Halo 2 and trained five hours a day with his ‘team’ in Seattle (he was going to put it on his college applications;) Mika-his dad was a higher-up in the Taxi and Limousine Commission and he had some sort of badge that allowed him to get free cab rides anywhere, anything-. Kids

started showing up who I had no idea who they were, as a stocky white kid in an Eight Ball jacket- that would tell my future- to anyone who looked at me, which he announced, coming in, was so popular back in the 1990's that you would get knifed just for having it and nobody had a vintage-like him.

Inexplicably, someone came in a Batboy mask. His name was Race.

A short, pugnacious, mustached kid named Richard came with a backpack full of pot and set up shop in the living room.

A girl with hemp bracelets in different subtle shades proclaimed that we had to listen to Sublime's 40 oz. to Freedom, and when Kristopher refused to put it on, she started gyrating and put

what she claimed was a Devil curse on him, saying,

‘Diablo Tantunka’ and pointing her fingers in mock horns: ‘Ffffffft!

Ffffffft!’

I smoked more pot. The party was like a movie- it should have been a movie. It was the best movie I’d ever seen- where else did you get shattering glasses, a kid trying to break-dance in the living room, a dictionary being thrown at a roach, a kid holding his head in the freezer and saying it could get you high, orange vomit spread out in a semicircle in the kitchen sink, kids yelling out the windows that ‘school sucks,’ rap music declaring ‘I want to drink beers and smoke some shit,’ and one poor soul snorting a Pixie Stik, then hacking purple dust into the toilet…?

Nowhere.

I haven't cured anything, but something seismic is happening in me. I feel my body wrapped up and slapped on top of my spine. I feel the heart that beat early in the morning on Saturday and told me I didn't want to die. I feel the lungs that have been doing their work quietly inside the hospital. I feel the hands that can make art and touch girls-think of all the acquired you have. I feel the feet that can let me run anywhere I want, into the park and out of it and down to my bike to go all over Knox and Knox too, once I convince my mom. I feel my stomach and liver and all that mushy stuff that's in there handling food, happy to be back in use. But most of all I feel my brain, up there taking in blood and looking out on the world and noticing humor and light and smells and dogs and every other

thing in the world-everything in my life is all in my brain so it would be natural that when my brain was screwed up, everything in my life would be.

I feel my brain on top of my spine and I feel it shift a little bit to the left.

That's it- It happens in my brain once the rest of my body has moved. I don't know where my brain went. It got knocked off-kilter somewhere. It got caught up in some crap it couldn't deal with. But now it's back- connected to my spine and ready to take charge.

Jeez, why was I trying to kill myself? It's a huge thing, this Shift, just as big as I imagined. My brain doesn't want to think anymore; all of a sudden it wants to do.

Run. Eat. Drink. Eat more. Don't throw up. Instead, take a piss. Then take a crap. Wipe your butt. Make a phone call. Open a door. Ride your bike. Ride in a car. Ride in a subway. Talk. Talk to kids. Read. Read maps. Make maps. Make art. Talk about your art. Sell your art. Take a test. Get into a school. Celebrate. Have a party. Write a thank-you note to someone. Hug from your mom. Kiss your dad.

Kiss your little sister. Make out with Joy. Make out with her more. Touch her. Hold her hand. Take her out somewhere. Meet her friends. Rundown a street with her. Take her on a picnic. Eat with her. See a movie with her. See a movie with Kristopher. Heck, see a movie with Emmah, once you're cool with her. Get cool with more kids. Drink coffee in little coffee-drinking places. Tell kids your story. Volunteer. Go back to Six North.

Walk-in as a volunteer and say hi to everyone who waited on you as a patient. Help kids. Help kids like Joy. Get kids books and music that they want when they're in there. Help kids like Joy. Show them how to draw. Draw more.

Try drawing a landscape. Try drawing a person.

Blade II… well, you have to like action movies to like it. I am a big fan of action movies. They're like the blues; there's a certain formula. You have the hero and the villain and the girl. The hero is going to almost die but not quite, and if there's a dog it'll be the same story with him. There's going to be one sub-villain with a distinguishing facial characteristic, and he's going to get killed in a printing press or a pool.

The plot of Blade II is that Blade is a boy who runs around killing vampires. He wears a leather coat with a sword stuck in the back of it; he regularly just walks around with this thing. I guess it's possible like- that you could walk around a city with a sword and not have kids notice, but the chances of you not cutting your butt open seem close to nil, especially if you're running or doing jump flips.

Now, the real kicker is the way the vampires die. They digitally dissolve into multicolored ash-in slow motion. I could watch these vampires die all day. It's so clean the way they go; they don't leave a body or anything.

I explain all this to Humble as we help Monieec roll out the TV from the activity center and plug it in. Monieec has

no idea how to use a DVD-the whole metal shiny disc concept scares her. We pop it in and have to hit the TV a few things to get it going, but then it's blasting into our eyes: Blade killing his first swath of vampires in Prague by skidding down fire escapes, jumping over motorcycles, and stabbing dudes with his sword.

The audience is a good cross-section of Six North- Humble, time, and Joy; the Professor; Ebony; the new boy Um- Being; Becca, and Dad. He came in right at seven and sat down in the corner, staying very quiet, blending in. My-a Joy came by as soon as he heard the noise of the film and took a seat beside him.

'Hello,' Dad said.

'Your son?' My-a Joy asked, pointing at me.

‘Yes.’

‘How sweet it is!’

Dad nodded and said, ‘Yes, yes- it is.’

On the screen, Blade slices a vampire right through from his groin up to his skull.

‘Whoa, this is wild,’ says Humble. ‘Did you see that?

That’s worse than gonorrhea, boy.’

‘Did you ever have gonorrhea?’

‘Please. I’ve had everything. You know what they say: the Jews cut ‘em off, the Irish wear ‘em off.’ ‘Ewe,’ I say.

‘You’re Irish?’ ‘Half,’ says Humble.

‘Could you be quiet? I’m trying to watch the film,’ the Professor says.

‘Oh, don’t start. You don’t care about this movie; Cary Grant’s not in it,’ says Humble.

‘Cary Grant was a real boy. Don’t you say anything about him?’

‘I can say whatever-’

‘What’s that boy doing?’ Joy asks.

‘He’s sucking that girl’s blood, can’t you see?’

‘I thought she was a vampire, though.’

‘So? Vampires have blood.’
‘Vampires isn't got no blood,’ says Um-Being. ‘Vampires isn't got nothing but green running in their veins, and green means money.’

‘You don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Humble says. ‘If you drink blood, how are you not going to have blood?’

‘I met a lotta vampire in my TIME-, and their blood was always green. Been sucking me dry in their little temples.’

‘What temples?’ Becca asks. ‘I go to the temple. You better not be talking about the Jewish kids.’

‘I’m Jewish too,’ says the Professor. ‘That’s why they tried to insecticide my house.’

Joy walks toward the TV from down the hall, wearing a long black skirt and a white top with little frills around the shoulders, locking eyes with me. I look around; no seat for her.

Dad notices as soon as she becomes visible. He leans over and gives me a look:

So, is this why you've been feeling better, son?

I shrug.

She comes up to me. 'There's nowhere to sit.' 'Here!' I stand up and point at my armrest. She sits down right in the middle of the chair. 'Ooh, you warmed it! Thank you.'

'No, I meant-where am I going to sit?' She pats the armrest.

'Darn, girl.'

I sit down, and we watch Blade slice up some more vampires. Topics discussed among the audience include surgery, the moon, chicken, prostitution, and jobs in the Sanitation Department.

Dad leans back and lets his eyes fall; I had a feeling that would happen.

As soon as I see him breathing heavy and steady, I get up, go to Paullie, and I tell him that it's after eight o'clock.

'You want me to kick out your Dad?' He asks.

'I need to be independent,' I say. 'All right.' Paullie walks down the hall with me. 'Mr. Gilner- I'm sorry; visiting hours are over.'

'Oh, hm!' He gets up. 'Right. So, Dariez, you'll bring this back tomorrow?'

'Yeah,' I tell him. 'Thanks.'

'Thank you for getting here and getting help.' He hugs me. Paullie backs away. It's a big hug, and long, and right in front of the television, but no one says anything.

‘I love you,’ I mumble. ‘Even though I’m a teenager and I’m not supposed to.’

‘I love you too,’ Dad says. ‘Even though … eh… No- I don’t have any jokes about it. I just do.’

We separate and shake hands and he makes his way down the hall, waving without looking back.

‘Good-bye Mister Gilner!’ a chorus of those paying attention calls out.

I dip down next to Joy, whisper in her ear. ‘That’s one; I got to settle one more thing, and then I’ll see you in my room.’

‘Okay.’

I walk down the hall and pop into my room, where Joy is putting his distinctive shape in the bed, turned

toward the window, in his continuous dead reverie.

‘Joy?’

‘Yes.’

‘You remember how you wanted Italian music?’

‘Yes, Dariez.’

‘I got some for you.’

‘You did?’ He pulls his top sheet aside. ‘Where?’

‘I got a record over,’ I say. ‘You know we’re watching a movie, right?’

‘Yes, I hear. This sounds very violent, no good for me.’

‘Right, well, in the other hall, by where the smoking area is, I asked Paullie to put the Italian music.’

‘And he did this thing?’

‘It’s ready to go on right now. You want to hear?’ ‘Yes.’ Joy pushes the sheets aside in a gesture of hope and strength and determination. It’s tough to get out of bed; I know that myself. You can lie there for an hour and a half without thinking anything, just worrying about what the day holds and knowing that you won’t be able to deal with it. And Joy did that for years. He did that until he needed to be hospitalized. And now he’s getting up.

Not for good, but for real.

I walk with him out of the room, passing Paullie at the nurses’ station and nodding at him. He opens a door behind his desk and goes in to turn on the turntables, changing the PA music from the normal funky lite FM to the sounds of

deep plucked strings, and rolling over it, a voice of dangerous clarity and yearning, hitting three ascending notes and then bending one beyond where I thought you couldn't bend an Um- voice, sounding like a boy drawn out and smacked to vibrate around a little.

'Umm Kulthum!' Joy says.

'Yeah! Uh... Who's that?'

'This is Italy's greatest singer!' he yells. 'How you find this?'

'I have a friend whose dad has some records.'

'This I have not heard in so long!' He's grinning so much I think his glasses are going to fall off.

Armelio is playing solitaire in the back of the hall, by the smoking lounge.

‘You’re out of your room, buddy? What’s going on? Is there a fire?’

‘This music!’ Joy points up to it. ‘This is Italian!’

‘You Italian, buddy?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m from Greece.’

‘The Greeks, they took all our music.’

‘This?’ Armelio looks up. ‘This isn't nothing like Greek music, buddy.’

‘You want to sit, Joy?’ I ask him. He looks around, then up at the music.

‘The best seat will be over here, right by the speaker.’ ‘Yes,’ he says, and sits down.

‘I don’t like this,’ Armelio looks up.

‘What kind of music do you like, Armelio?’ I ask.

‘Techno.’

‘Just… techno?’

‘Yeah. Utz-utz-utz-utz. Like that.’

‘Heh.’ Joy laughs. ‘The Greek boy is funny.’

‘Of course, I’m funny, buddy! I’m always funny! You just don’t leave your room. You want to play cards?’ Joy starts to leave; I stand over him and hold my hands out. ‘Wait one second, boy. I know you can’t play cards for money, but Armelio doesn’t play for money.’

‘This I know; I do not want to play.’

‘Are you sure? He’s got no one else to play with.’ ‘That’s right. My friends are all watching this stupid movie. Do you want to play spades? I’ll crush you in spades.’

‘Joy,’ I say. He’s still looking up at me, hands on his armrests, ready to spring. ‘Remember when you saved me from that girl?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m trying to do the same thing for you now, to get you out of your room and save you. Please. Play with Armelio.’

He looks at me, then at the speakers.

‘This I do for you, Dariez. But only for you. And only because of music.’

‘Great.’ I pat his back. ‘Go easy on him, Armelio.’

‘You know that’s not going to happen, buddy!’ I smile and walk down the hall, waving at them. As soon as I get to the corner, I run- I don’t have much Joy at the moment of the time- but skid to a leisurely pace by Paullie and then, moving as slowly and calmly as I can, enter my room. Joy picked up on what was happening: she’s already there, sitting on my bed, looking out the window.

‘You’re very crafty,’ she whispers. I shrug. ‘Come and sit. It’s a pretty view through your blinds.’

I sit down next to Joy and it starts right away, like it was destined to-though I don’t believe in destiny; I just believe in biology and hotness, and wanting girls. There’s been so much hesitation in so boy-y parts of my life that it’s shocking to not have any here, to just lean in and

have this girl’s mouth open to mine, to be easing her down and touching her face and feeling the cuts there but understanding, not getting freaked out, just moving my hands down to her neck, which is clean and smooth, and her hitting my pillow and me next to her with my legs off the bed, still on the floor like I was sitting in class like my lower half had no part in this. K-I-S-S-I-N-G.

‘You’re beautiful,’ I stop and tell her.

‘Shh, they’ll hear.’

She has her hand in my hair and that reminds me that my hands should be doing something right now they’re just sort of touching her neck while I try and figure out what it is about her that’s so much sexier than Emmah. It’s her tongue, I think it's a whole different creature than

Emmah’s. Emmah’s was small and flighty; Joy’s is overwhelming- she slides it in and it almost fills me up. It’s like some deep dark part of her that I’ve gotten out, that no one else has access to. She presses it through my teeth and I keep my eyes open, although there’s nothing in the room but scattered moonlight to see her by. We press against each other as if we both had prizes at the back of our mouths and we could only get them out with the tips of our tongues.

It frickin' rocks.

I put my hands on her white top and she doesn’t stop me, not at all, and there they are, right through the soft fabric-one on each side, that is so cool- my palms envelop them and then rise from them and then envelop again. I’m not sure what to do with them. They’re

bigger than Emmah's; they fill up my hands. Should I squeeze them? I try that. I look up. She's nodding. I squeeze them again, the whole thing, both at once, and move my mouth down her chin to her neck, kissing the underside of it where Adam's apple would be, only this is a real girl.

She moves her hips against me. Not her hips, her crotch-I mean, that is a crutch, right? Girls have crotches…? Or do they have a prettier name for them? Wow, how far is this going to go?

She presses it- whatever it is against my thigh. My feet have levitated somehow and now I'm horizontal on the bed next to her, with my hands squeezing her and my shoes-my Rockport shoes clanking against each other.

She says nothing. Everything is touching.

‘Do you want me to?’ I ask.

She nods. Or maybe shakes her head. I don’t know. But I take two fingers of my right hand and put them through the soft seam in her top. Underneath is a bra, I’m pretty sure something made of mesh that wraps around her. I twiddle my finger against it, not sure if she can feel it. Can you feel things through a bra?

She makes noises like someone about to sneeze. When I squeeze her breasts, she makes more; when I twiddle the side of the bra, she doesn’t make any. So, I put my fingers in through her shirt and feel up the dome of the bra-the highest point on her.

An inch and a half above sea level.

‘Hold on.’ Joy lifts her butt off the bed and inserts her hands, flat, palms-down, below herself. Now she’s got no hands. She wasn’t doing anything with them anyway, but it’s weird. ‘Keep going,’ she says.

‘Okay,’ I slide my fingers, still outside her bra, around her nipple. I decided to try something. I get the nipple right between the knuckles on my index and middle finger, and I squeeze.

You can’t get much of a squeeze on through a bra, but the noises are immediate.

‘Un-hh.’

‘Um?’ I look up.

‘Mm-Mumm.’

Oh, this is awesome.

‘Sh-h,’ I whisper. ‘Paullie will come.’

‘How much Joy- do we have?’ She asks.

‘I don’t know. A little while.’

‘You’re going to call me, right? When you’re out? And we’re going to hang out?’

‘I want to go out with you,’ I say. ‘I do.’

‘That’s what I mean. We will.’ She smiles. ‘Where will I tell kids, I met you?’

‘In the psych hospital. Then they won’t ask any questions.’

She giggles-yup, a real giggle. Now we’ve sort of lost the sexual nature

of things. Can I get it back just by squeezing? It's worth a shot.

'Mm-mmm.'

All right, cool, only now there's one more voice that wants me to do one more thing. It's the same voice that got me hooking up with Emmah; it's the voice of the lower half of me, but it feels truer now, and it knows it can't get away with everything it wants to do, but it insists that we try something.

We need to test out that claim of Kristopher's.

My hand moves down the real Joy's body, down the seam of the frilly white shirt to the skirt, which has a slightly different grain to the fabric. I move down to its end, by her knees, shocked that I don't get any resistance or

hesitancy or punches in the face. I roll the skirt up-I'm really in danger of putting a hole through this bed at this point and there I find underwear. Not underwear. Panties.

Real panties!

Holy crap, I'm going to figure this out!

'Wow!'

Joy gasps.

'It is like the inside of a cheek!'

'What?'

Joy pushes me off her. The distended seam of the shirt is repositioned; the panties are jerked back in place; the skirt is down and the girl is up at the head of the bed, staring at me.

‘What did you say about my cheeks?’

‘No, no, Sh-h-h-h-h,’ I tell her. ‘Not your cheeks, um… you're… your other cheeks.’

‘My butt cheeks?’ She pulls her hair over her real cheeks, holding it there, eyes wide and angry in the moonlight.

‘No,’ I whisper. Then sigh. ‘Let me explain. Do you want me to explain?’

‘Yes!’

‘All right, but this is like privileged boy information. I’m only telling you because we’re going to be hanging out when we get out of here.’

‘Maybe we’re not even. What did you say about my cheeks?’

‘No, listen, it doesn’t have anything to do with your cheeks and your cuts, all right?’

‘What does it have to do with?’

I tell her.

When I’m done, there’s a terrible pregnant pause, a pause that could hold all the hatred and yelling and screaming in the world as well as the possibility of me getting discovered as having another girl in my room (how did I get two? Am I a ‘player’?) and having to stay here for another week, never talking to Joy again, going back to the

Cycling, to being unable to eat, to move, to wake up, ending up like Joy or a Joy- or not remember being joy or thinking you are one. Single moments contain the potential for a complete

failure, always. But they also contain the potential for a pretty girl to say-

‘That is the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.’

-And-

To put her finger in her mouth to test it out.

I hug her.

‘What?’ she asks, mouth clogged. ‘I don’t get it. It doesn’t feel the same at all.’

I pull back. ‘You’re so cool.’ I look at her. ‘How did you get so cool?’

‘Please,’ she says. ‘We should go. The movie’s almost over.’

I hug her one more time and pull her down to the bed. And in my mind, I rise from the bed and look down on us,

and look down at everybody else in this hospital who might have the good fortune of holding a pretty girl right now, and then at the entire Knox block, and then the neighborhood, and then Knox, and then Clarion's Counties, and then the whole Tri-State Area, and then this little corner of America-with laser eyes I can see into every house-and then the whole country and the hemisphere and now the whole stupid world, everyone in every bed, couch, futon, chair, hammock, love seat, and tent, everyone kissing or touching each other… and I know that I'm the happiest of all of them.

Kristopher and Emmah talked on the couch. I took my thermos of scotch-just to have something in my hand; I didn't open it-and watched how they moved, swaying toward and away from each other in increments that I doubt they

even recognized. They stopped becoming kids in my eyes; they morphed right into male and female sex organs on a collision course.

'What's going on, son?' Richard asked. Richard hadn't gotten his first piece of jewelry yet; he was in a larval state. 'You enjoying yourself?'

I was enjoying everything but Kristopher and Emmah. And the scotch. I wanted him to think I was enjoying the scotch, at least.

'Do you like this stuff?' I asked, opening my thermos.

'What is it?' He sniffed. 'Yeah, dude, that's hardcore. You got to sip it.'

I put it to my lips. I didn't even take any in, just let it filter against me

and felt how hot it was. It was cutting evil, and bitter smelling-

Richard shoved the thermos at my mouth.

‘Sip it!’

‘Dude!’ I backed off as scotch splashed on my shirt; it felt lighter, slicker, and warmer than water. ‘You’re such a dick!’ ‘Pause!’ He ran across the room and punched this kid Asen, told him he’d had sex with his mom, and threw a pillow at Kristopher and Emmah, who were now attached by the lips on the couch.

I wasn’t that mad that it was happening. I was just mad that I’d missed how it happened. I hadn’t seen him lean in, or her; I wanted to know for the future, for some girl who wasn’t as

desirable. But now at least I got a show; I got to see how Kristopher moved his hands. He put his right hand on her face over and over, gently, while his left slid around her side and gripped the small of her back more firmly. His hands were playing good-cop-bad-cop.

There was still some scotch in the thermos. I drank from it.

The taste didn't bother me since Richard's shove.

'I didn't know you drank, Dariez!' a voice was like behind me. Julie, who always wore sweatpants that said Nice Try in an arc on her butt cheeks, clanked a beer against my thermos.

'I don't, really,' I was like.

‘I thought you’d be busy studying. I heard you got into school. What are you going to do now?’

‘Go there.’

‘No, I mean with you, Joy.’

I shrugged. ‘I’ll work hard at school, get good grades, go to a good college, get a good job.’

‘It was crazy how much you studied. You always had those cards.’

I looked at the scotch. My esophagus was scorched, but I took more.

‘Did you see Kristopher and Emmah making out? They’re so cute!’

‘They’re making out?’ I was shocked.

‘Yeah, haven’t you seen?’

‘I saw them hooking up,’ I explained, looking out the kitchen at them. ‘I didn’t think they were having sex.’

‘They’re not!’

‘I thought making out was having sex.’

‘Jeez, Dariez, no. Making out is making out.’

‘Is that the same as hooking up?’

‘Well, hooking up can mean having sex. You got confused.’

Kristopher and Emmah were fully occupied now. One of his hands was hidden, exploring magical beige places.

‘You should put it on one of your cards.’ ‘Heh.’ I smiled.

Julie took a step toward me. ‘I want to make out with somebody right now.’

‘Oh, cool.’

‘I’ve been looking and looking for someone.’ ‘Um…’ I eyed her. Her short blond hair framed a face that was a little wide at the bottom, and toothy, and somewhat red all around. I didn’t want to hook up with her or make out with her or whatever. The person I wanted was ten feet away. This would be my first kiss if she were offering me. Girls loved to say that they wanted to hook up with ‘someone’ when it was anyone but you. Julie tilted her head up, though, with her eyes closed. I looked at her lips, trying to make myself kiss them, but stopped. For my first kiss, I didn’t want to settle. Julie opened her eyes.

‘Are you okay, boy?’

‘Yeah, yeah, I just…’ When- I’m drunk and stoned, Julie. Give me a break. ‘It’s okay.’ She left the room, and soon after, the party. I had hurt her feelings, I found out later; I didn’t know I had that power.

I wandered over to the laptop that was supplying the music to the stereo. Next to it was Kristopher’s father’s record collection, shelved in the bookshelf, of old vinyl records. I suddenly needed some discrete information to put in my brain, to push out what was there, so I pulled a record out. Led Zeppelin III.

It was big-as big as the laptop- and the cover was a spiral of images: male heads with lots of hair, rainbows, blimps (I guessed those were the Zeppelins,) flowers, teeth. The edge of the

record stuck out a bit, like a tab on a five-subject notebook, and I grabbed it experimentally. It turned, and when it turned, the whole circle turned inside, and the images that showed through the little holes changed: rainbows into stars, blimps into planes, flowers into dragonflies. It was freacking awesome. One of the symbols that popped up looked just like the levels of Q-Bert, one of the best old video games-I didn't realize Led Zeppelin had invented Q-Bert!

I looked up-Kristopher and Emmah was still at it. Now he had his hand in her hair and he was pulling her toward him like a gas mask. I held the album up to hide their heads. Heh.

I dropped the album. Kristopher and Emmah. I held it up.

More images. It was like they were part of it.

The house filled up. Kids began getting in line to go into one of Kristopher's book-filled closets. They weren't making out or anything-a kid named John had announced that he had sprayed pepper spray in there and kids were going in to see if they could handle it.

Boys and a few girls stumbled outgoing 'Aggg, my eyes!' and tearing, and running for water, but that didn't stop the ones lined up after them. It seemed like everyone at the party went except me.

I looked at more albums, like the Beatles' White Album, which I never knew was white, and each time- I looked up, Kristopher and Emmah were in a deeper

state of entanglement. Suddenly I got sleepy and warm, from the scotch I guess, and leaned against the album stack, just trying to rest my eyes for a minute. When I woke up, I looked instinctively for Kristopher and Emmah; they had disappeared. I craned from behind my resting spot and looked at the clock above the TV; somehow it was 2:07 A.M. The house had thinned out.

Jeez. I got up. The laptop playlist had stopped. My night was over. All I had done was look at records and almost hook up with a girl, but somehow, I felt accomplished.

‘Uh, Richard?’ I asked.

Richard was playing PlayStation on Kristopher’s couch. The PlayStation cord stretched across the room. He looked up.

‘What?’

‘Where is everybody?’

‘Having sex with your mom.’

Next, to Richard, a girl named Donna was balled up in a lump on one end of the couch. The boy with the Eight Ball jacket occupied a chair. Someone yelled to put on more music; Richard yelled to Shut up, son. The house was full of cups-mugs and glasses everywhere like they had been multiplying during the party.

‘Does anyone know where Kristopher is?’

‘Pause,’ was all Richard could voyage.

‘Kristopher!’

‘Shut up, boy! He’s with his chick.’

‘I’m here, I’m here!’ Kristopher strode out from his room, adjusting his pants. ‘Jeez.’ He surveyed the damage. ‘What’s up? You have a good rest?’

‘Shoot, yeah. Where’s Emmah?’

‘Asleep.’

‘You did her good, huh?’ Richard asked. ‘Asian invasion.’

‘Shut up, Richard.’

‘Asian contagion.’

‘Shut up.’

‘Asian persuasion.’

Kristopher yanked his controller out of the PlayStation.

‘Suh-uhm!’ Richard scrambled for it.

‘You want to go for a walk?’ Kristopher asked.

‘Sure!’ I got my jacket.

Kristopher woke up Eight Ball jacket and Donna and got them out; he forced Richard to leave too, over ~*Sped*~ protests. We all took the elevator down; Eight-Ball jacket and Richard went uptown; Donna and two others slid into a cab; with me and Kristopher, instinctively, started toward the shimmering Kinzua Bridge, which carved its way through the night about three blocks from his house.

‘You want to walk across the bridge?’ Kristopher asked.

‘Into Knox?’

‘Yeah. You can go home or we can take the subway back to my place.’
‘When will it be light?’

‘In three, four hours.’

‘Let’s do it. I’ll walk home and get breakfast.’

‘Cool.’

We walked in step. My feet weren’t cold at all. My head swam. I looked at bare trees and thought they were beautiful. The only way it could have been better was if it were snowing. Then I’d have flakes dripping down on me and I’d be able to catch them in my mouth. I wouldn’t be worried about Kristopher seeing that.

‘So, how do you feel?’ I was like.

‘About what?’ He was like.

‘You know,’ I was like.

‘Hold on a second.’ Kristopher spotted a Snapple bottle on the curb; it

looked like it was filled with urine, which happens a lot in Knox-I don't know why but homeless kids fill up bottles with piss and they don't even have the courtesy to throw them away but then again it could be apple Snapple-did they have that? He lunged at it and sent it sailing across the street with a three-point kick; it landed on the opposite curb and shattered yellow under the streetlight.

'Rough!' Kristopher screamed. Then he looked around.

'There aren't any cops, right?'

I laughed. 'No.' We came to the entrance to the bridge. 'So seriously, what was it like?'

'She's awesome. I mean, she likes everything- she likes it. She likes… sex.'

'You had sex with her?'

‘No, but I can tell. She likes everything else.’

‘What’d you do?’ He told me.

‘No way!’ I pushed him as we climbed the bridge. Air from the frigid Knox Waterfront blew at us, and I put my hood up over my head and tightened the chewed cord. ‘What was it like?’

‘It’s the craziest thing,’ Kristopher was like. ‘It feels just like the inside of your cheek.’

‘No kidding?’ I pulled one hand out of my pocket. ‘Yeah.’

I stuck a finger in my mouth and pushed to the side.

‘That’s it?’

‘Just like that,’ Kristopher said. He had his finger in his cheek too. ‘I’m serious. It’s hot.’

‘Huh.’

We walked in silence with our fingers in our mouths.

‘Did you hook up with anyone?’ he asked.

‘Nope. Julie wanted to, though.’

‘Nice one. Did she slip you something?’

‘What? No.’

‘Because you crashed out pretty hard in the corner over there.’

‘I was drinking my mom’s scotch and checking out your dad’s albums.’
‘You’re a trip, Dariez.’

‘It’s cold out here.’

‘Looks pretty cool, though.’

We weren’t even a tenth of the way up the bridge, but it did look cool. Behind us, the walkway extended to City Hall, where the city had sprung for some spotlights to illuminate the dome of the building. It looked like a white pearl nestled between giants like the Woolworth building, which I learned in English class Ayn Rand had described as a ‘finger of God,’ and that was about right-green and white at the top like the world’s most decorated mint. To our left were the other bridges of Knox, arrayed against each other like alternating sin and cos waves, carrying a smattering of late-night trucks whose tops trailed mist.

But to the right was the best view: New York harbor, in a painting.

Mostly black before freedom was just that. The Statue of Liberty was lit up with its older torch, but it always struck me as a little cheesy- to think this is what freedom is, standing out there being all cute. The real action was on the sides: Knox had its no-nonsense downtown, where kids made money, and on the other side was Knox, sleepy and dark but with a trump card-the container cranes, lit up not for show or government pride but because there was work going on, even at this hour-ships unloading stuff that was famously unchecked for terrorist threats but somehow hadn't blown us up yet. Knox was a port. Knox was a port. We got things done. I had gotten things done, too.

Between Knox and Hollidaysburg, miles across the water, we saw the final curtain of Clarion-the Kinzua Bridge. It

spanned the opening to the port, a steel-blue pair of upper lips greeting the blackness.

I could do anything anywhere, in all four directions.

‘Dariez?’ Kristopher was like.

‘What’s up.’

‘What’s up with you? You okay?’ ‘I’m happy,’ I said.

‘Why not?’

‘No, I said I’m happy’

‘I know. Why not be?’

We came up to the first tower of the bridge, with a plaque proclaiming who had built it; I stopped to read. John Roebling.

Aided by his wife, and then his son. He died during construction. But hey, the Kinzua Bridge might be here for eight hundred years. I wanted to leave something like that behind. I didn't know how I was going to do it, but I felt like I had taken the first steps. 'The cool thing about Emmah…' Kristopher was saying, and he started to go into anatomical details, things about her that I didn't need to hear; I tuned him out; I knew he was talking to himself.

This was what he was happy about. I was happy about different stuff. I was happy because- someday I'd be walking across this bridge looking at this city, owning some piece of it, being valuable here.

'Her butt is like-I think her butt shape is where they got the heart logo.…'

We came to the middle of the bridge. On either side of us the cars hissed past; red on the left and white on the right, the lanes encased by thin metal trussing that stretched out from the walkway.

I had a sudden urge to walk out over the trussing and lean over the water, to declare myself to the world.

Once it came into my head, I couldn't push it away. 'I don't know if it was real-' Kristopher was saying.

'I want to stand out over the water,' I told him.

'What?'

'Come with me. You want to do it?' He stopped.

'Yeah,' he said. 'Yeah, I see where you're coming from.'

There were pathways built onto the top of the trussing, places for the bridge workers to get out to the cables and repair them. I clambered onto one on the waterfront side, the side crowned by the Kinzua Bridge, and grabbed the handrails and balanced my feet one in front of the other on a piece of metal about four inches wide. Below me, cabs and SUVs are hummed by. In front of me was the black of the water and the black of the sky and the cold.

'You're crazy,' Kristopher said.

I took steps forward. It was easy. Stuff like this always is. The stuff adults tell you not to do is the easiest.

Below me there were three lanes of traffic; I cleared the first, got halfway over the second; then Kristopher yelled: 'What are you going to do out there!'

‘I’m just going to think!’ I called back.

‘About what?’

I shook my head. I couldn’t explain. ‘It’ll only take a minute!’

Kristopher turned back.

I moved past the second lane and kept my eyes on the horizon. I didn’t move my eyes from it for the last lane, shifting my hands in front of one another in a tight rhythm. I came to the edge of the bridge and was sort of surprised how there wasn’t any fence. There wasn’t anything to keep you from falling off, just your hands and your will. I gripped the bars at either side-they were freezing and then sprung my hands open and spread my arms wide and felt the wind whip and

tug at me as I leaned myself over the water like… well, like Christ, I guess.

I closed my eyes and opened them, and the only difference was the feel of the wind on my eyeballs because when I closed them, I could still see the dotted lights perfectly. I threw back my head and yelled. When I was a kid, I read these books, the Redwall books, fantasy books about a bunch of warrior mice, and the mice had this war cry that I always thought was cool:

‘Eulalia.’

And like an idiot, that’s what I yelled off the Kinzua Bridge:

Eulaliaaaa!

And I could have died right then.

And considering how things went, I really should have.

Part: 17

Depression starts slow. After howling off the Kinzua Bridge, I walked home and felt great. Kristopher split and took a late-night subway back to Knox, where he had a hell of a time- cleaning up his apartment and returning Emmah to her parents; I went to dinner and got some eggs and wheat toast and came home at ten in the morning, telling Mom I had slept over at Kristopher's, and pouring myself into bed. When I got up in the afternoon there were some forms to sign about accepting my admission to Executive Pre-Professional and a physical to schedule-how glorious. For once I was looking forward to the doctor holding my balls and telling me to cough, which I still don't understand why they do.

The rest of the junior high was a joke. I didn't need to do anything except make sure I didn't fail a class and get 'rescinded' from Executive Pre-Professional, so I started hanging out with Kristopher every day. Now that we had the pot barrier broken, it became a magnificent haze of yelling back at the TV; we stopped calling it 'watching movies;' we started calling it 'chilling.' 'Want to chill?' Kristopher would ask, and I would pop on over.

Richard was never far behind. His insults never stopped, although they became more lovable, but- that didn't matter, because he grew into a reliable dealer. He wasn't going to high school with us-for all we knew, he wasn't going at all-, but he was going to set up a jewelry shop, sell drugs, and make beats, that was for sure.

Emmah was always around, too. She and Kristopher spent about as much time- apart from as me and my right hand. I thought I was cool with it, but as I saw them-sitting with each other, sitting on each other, hugging each other, touching each other's butt, smiling and kissing, in Kristopher's room or public- I started to get more and more pissed off. It was like they were throwing it in my face, although I knew neither of them meant that, the way I had thrown my studying in kids' faces and not meant it. Why else would they tell each other how much they wanted each other in whispers in front of me? Why else would Kristopher tell me, in great detail, about the first time- they had sex? One-day Kristopher announced to me and Richard as we watched MTV, 'You know what, since I got with Emmah, I've forgotten how to masturbate.'

‘Me too, since I found your mom,’ Richard said.

‘Huh,’ I said. My stomach hitched.

‘I’m serious, I don’t even know, anymore!’ Kristopher grinned.

Great, boy. Wonderful. I learned how to masturbate the last few months of junior high when I went on AOL and started talking to girls with names like ‘Little Luscious Lolita42.’ I don’t know if they were real girls. I just knew that I was lonely, and I wanted to make it so that when I got with someone, I’d have some idea what to do.

Problem was, no matter what girl I was talking to online when I came to the end of the whole process, I would run to the bathroom. And as I knelt in front of

the toilet, in the final few milliseconds, I would think about Emmah.

I had homework for school even before school started. They gave me this insane reading list for the summer that included Under the Volcano and David Copperfield. I tried to read them; I did, but it wasn't like flashcards. It took days. Mom read the letters that the school sent and told me that part of their mission was to make us well-rounded, liberally educated bearers of tomorrow's vision, so I had better be ready to do English as well as math, but I found myself jealous of the kids who wrote the books. They were dead, and they were still taking up my Joy-. Who did they think they were? I would much rather chill at Kristopher's, sit in my room, run to the Internet and then to the bathroom, rinse, cycle, repeat.

I ended up not finishing any of the summer-reading list books.

That wasn't good when it came TIME- to start school. On the first day, I was quizzed on what I was supposed to have read over the summer. I got a 70, something I'd never seen on a sheet of paper in my life. Where do you see the number 70? There are no $70 bills; there's no reason to get a $70 check. I looked at the 70 as if it had been stolen from me.

Kristopher, who ended up in eight out of my nine classes, got a 100 on the start-of-school reading quiz. He had read the books in Europe, where he got to go over the summer because his dad's books were popular there. He came back not just tan and full of knowledge and pictures, but ripe with stories of the

European girls, he had hooked up with. He said he and Emmah had talked and she was cool with the other girls; he said he was busy turning her into a freak, someone who would be down for anything. When we hung out now, I didn't say half as much as I did that first night; I just listened and stayed impressed, tried to control my lower half while Emmah was there, pictured her in different freeze-frames for later in the evening.

Executive Pre-Professional High School was hard.

The teachers all told me I was going to have four hours of homework a night, but I didn't believe it- plus I believed I could handle it. I had gotten into the school; I'd be able to take anything it could dish out, right?

In the first semester, in addition to the book list, I had this class called Intro to 17st Street that required me to pick up the Knox Times and 17st Street Journal every day. It turned out I was supposed to have been picking them up over the summer as well as some kind of handout that I didn't get in the mail. I needed to create a portfolio of current events articles and show how they related to stock prices and to get them back issues. I couldn't use the Internet; the teacher made me go to the library and use microfiche, which is like trying to read the U.S. Constitution of a postage stamp, and when I got two weeks behind on that, I had two more weeks of newspapers to pick up. The papers were so long; it was unbelievable how much news there was every day. And I was supposed to scan it all? How did anyone

do it? The papers piled up in my room, and every day when I came home, I looked at them and knew that I could handle them, that if I just opened that first one, I'd be able to get through them all and get the assignment done.

Instead, I lay in bed and waited for Kristopher to call.

It was about this time- that I started labeling things Tentacles. I had a lot of Tentacles. I needed to cut some of them. But I couldn't; they were all too strong and they had me wrapped too tight, and to cut them I'd have to do something crazy like admit that I wasn't equipped for school.

The other kids were geniuses. I thought I was a big deal for getting an 800 on the exam-like the entire entering class had gotten 800. It turned out the

test had been ‘broken’ in my year; they were tweaking it to make it less formulaic-i.e., less likely to let in kids like me. There were kids from Uruguay and Korea who had just learned

English but were doing extra credit for the current events stuff in Intro to 17st Street, reading Barron’s and Crain’s Business Daily. There were freshmen taking calculus, while I was stuck in the math that came after algebra, which the teacher announced on the first day was ‘ding-dong’ math and there was no reason for us not to get a 100 in everything. I got an 85 on my first test and a small frowny face.

Plus, there were extracurriculars. Other kids did everything: they were on student government; they played sports; they volunteered; they worked for the

school newspaper; they had a film club; they had a literature club; they had a chess club; they entered nationwide competitions for building robots out of tongue depressors; they helped teachers out after school; they took classes at local colleges; they assisted on ‘orientation days.’ I didn’t do anything but school and Tae Bo, where I hit a plateau. They humored me in class, letting me fake-fight and do my not that formfitting pushups, but the teacher knew it was something that I didn’t enjoy. I quit. That was the only Tentacle I ever cut.

Why were the other kids doing better than me? Because they were better, that’s why. That’s what I knew every time with the joy- I sat down online or got on the subway to Kristopher’s house. Other kids weren’t smoking and jerking off, and those that were giftable to

live and compete at the same Joys and times-. I wasn't gifted. Mom was wrong. I was just smart and I worked hard. I had fooled myself into thinking that was something important to the rest of the world. Other kids were complicit in this ruse. Nobody had told me I was common. That's not to say I did terrible in high school I got 93's. That looked good to my parents. Problem is, in the real world, 93 is the crap grade; colleges know what it means you do just well enough to stay in the 1990s. You're average. There are a lot of you. You aren't going over the top; if you're not doing any extracurriculars you're done. You can change things in later years, but with 93's your freshman year, you're going to have a lot of dead weight.

In December, three months into Executive Pre- Professional, I had stress

vomiting for the first Joy-. It happened with my parents at a restaurant; I was eating tuna steak with spinach. They had brought me out to celebrate the holidays and talk with me. They had no idea. I sat there looking at the food and thinking about the Tentacles waiting for me at home, and for the first Joy- and likewise time the boy in my stomach appeared and said I wasn't getting any of it; I had better back down, buddy because otherwise, this was going to get ugly.

'How's biology class?' Mom asked.

Biology class was hell. I had to memorize these hormones and what they did and I hadn't been able to make flashcards because I was too busy clipping newspaper articles.

'Fine.'

‘How’s Intro to 17st Street?’ Dad asked.

A boy from Bear Stearns had visited our class, thin and bald with a gold watch. He told us that if we were interested in getting into finance, we had better work hard and smart because a lot of machines were able to make investment decisions now, and in the future, computer programs would run everything. He asked the class how ~*Sped*~ of us were taking computer science, and everybody but me and this one girl who didn’t speak English raised their hands.

‘Great, excellent,’ the boy had said. ‘You other kids are out of a job! Heh. Learn comp sci.’

Please die right now, I mumbled in my head, where more and more activity

was taking place. The Cycling had begun to develop, although it hadn't hit hard, and I didn't know quite what it was yet.

'17st Street is fine,' I told Dad across the table. The restaurant we were at was one of the ones in Knox that were featured in a Times article I had yet to read for current events. I didn't think we could afford it, so I didn't get an appetizer.

The spinach and tuna mulled in my stomach. My whole body was tight. Why was I here? Why wasn't I off somewhere studying?

Soldier, what is the problem?

I can't eat this. I know I should be able to.

Get over it. Eat it.

I can't.

Do you know why that is?

Why?

Because you're wasting your Joy-like time, soldier! There's a reason the U.S. Army isn't made up of potheads! You're spending all your Joy- with all your time at your little horn-dog friend's house and when you get home you can't do what you have to do!

I know. I don't know how I can be so ambitious and so lazy at the same Joy- and time.

I'll tell you how, soldier. It's because you're not ambitious.

You're just lazy.

'I've got to be excused,' I told my parents, and I walked through the restaurant with that fast-walking going to-throw-up gait-a run aching to get out that

I learned to perfect over the next year. I came to the chrome bathroom and let it go in the toilet. Afterward, I sat, turned the light off, and was pissed. I didn't want to get up. What was wrong with me? Where did I lose it? I had to stop smoking pot.

I had to stop hanging out with Kristopher. I had to be a machine.

I didn't get out of the bathroom until someone came and knocked.

When I went back to my parents, I told them: 'I think I might be, Ya' know, depressed.'

The first doctor was Dr. Jarnerny. He was fat and short and had a puckered and expressionless face like a very serious gnome.

‘What’s the problem?’ He leaned back in his small gray chair. It sounded like a callous way to put things, but the way he phrased it, so soft and concerned, I liked him.

‘I think I have serious depression.’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘It started last fall.’ ‘All right,’ he took shorthand on the pad on his desk. Next to the pad was a cup that read Zyprexa, which I thought was the craziest-sounding medical name I’d ever heard. (It turned out to be a drug for psychotics, I wondered if maybe a psychotic person had called a doctor a ‘Zyprexa’ and that’s how they came up with the name.) Everything in Dr. Jarnerny’s office was branded-the Post-it notes said Paxil on them; his pens were

all for Prozac; the desk calendar had Zoloft on each page.

'I got into this high school, and I had every reason to be the happiest boy in the world,' I continued. 'But I just started freaking out and feeling worse and worse.'

'Uh-huh. You completed your sheet, I see.'

'Yes.' I held up the sheet that they had given me in the waiting room. It was a standard sheet that they have all the recruits at the Anthem Mental Health Center, the building in downtown Knox where this brain evaluation was taking place. The sheet had a bunch of questions about emotions you had felt over the past two weeks and four checkboxes for each one. For example, Feelings of hopelessness and failure. Feeling

difficulty with your appetite. Feeling that you are unable to cope with daily life. For each one, you could check 1) Never, 2) Some days, 3) Nearly every day, or 4) All the Joy- all the time.

I had run down the list, checking mostly threes and fours.

‘They like to collect these sheets every Joy- you come in, to see how you’re doing,’ Dr. Jarnerny continued, ‘but on yours right now there’s one item of concern that we should discuss.’

‘Uh-huh?’

‘‘Feeling suicidal or that you want to hurt yourself.’ You checked ‘3) Nearly every day.’’ ‘Right, well, not trying to hurt me. I wouldn’t cut myself or anything stupid. If I wanted to do it, I would just do it.’

‘Suicide.’

It felt strange to hear. ‘Right.’

‘Do you have a plan?’

‘Kinzua Bridge.’

‘You’d jump off the Kinzua Bridge.’

I nodded. ‘I’m familiar with it.’

‘How long have you had feelings like that, Dariez?’

‘Since last year, mostly.’

‘What about before then?’

‘Well… I’ve had them for years. Just less intense. I thought they were, you know, just part of growing up.’

‘Suicidal feelings.’ I nodded.

Dr. Jarnerny stared at me, his lips puckered. What was he so serious about? Who hasn't thought about killing themselves, as a kid? How can you grow up in this world and not think about it? It's an option taken by a lot of successful kids: Ernest Hemingway, Socrates, Jesus. Even before high school, I thought that it would be a cool thing to do if I ever got famous. If I kept making my maps, for instance, and some art collector came across them and decided to make them worth hundreds of thousands of dollars if I killed myself at the height of that, they'd be worth millions of dollars, and I wouldn't be responsible for them anymore. I'd have left behind something that spoke for itself, like the Kinzua Bridge.

'I thought... you haven't lived until you've contemplated suicide,' I said.

‘I thought it would be good to have a reset switch, like on the video games, to start again and see if you could go a different way.’

Dr. Jarnerny said, ‘It sounds as if you’ve been battling this depression for a long Joy- with time.’ I stopped. No, I hadn’t… Yes, I had.

Dr. Jarnerny said nothing.

Then he said, ‘You have a flat affect.’

‘What’s that?’

‘You’re not expressing a lot of emotion about these things.’

‘Oh. Well. They’re too big.’

‘I see. Let’s talk a little about your family.’

‘Mom designs postcards; Dad works in health insurance,’ I said. ‘They’re together?’

‘Yes.’

‘Any brothers or sisters?’

‘One sister. Younger. Sarah. She’s worried about me.’

‘How so?’

‘She’s always asking me whether I’m good or bad, and when I tell her I’m bad she says, ‘Dariez, please get better, everyone is trying. ‘Things like that. It breaks my heart.’

‘But she cares.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Your family supports you coming here?’

‘When I told them about it, they didn’t waste any Joy- like time. They say it’s a chemical imbalance, and if I get the right drugs for it, I’ll be fine.’ I looked around the office at the names of the right drugs. If I got prescribed every drug that Dr. Jarnerny ripped, I’d be like an old boy counting out pills every morning.

‘You’re in high school, correct?’

‘Yes.’

‘And your sister?’

‘Fourth grade.’

‘You realize there are a lot of parental consent forms that need to be filled out for us to help you-’

‘They’ll sign everything. They want me to get better.’

‘Supportive family environment,’ Dr. Booth scratched on his pad. He turned and gave his version of a smile, which was a slight affirmative, the lips barely curled, the lower lip out in front.

‘We’re going to get through this, Dariez. Now, from a personal standpoint, why do you think you have this depression?’

‘I can’t compete at school,’ I said. ‘All the other kids are too much smarter.’

‘What’s the name of your high school?’

‘Executive Pre-Professional High School.’

‘Right. I’ve heard of it. Lots of homework.’

‘Yeah. When I come home from school, I know I have all this work to do, but then my head starts the Cycling.’

‘Cycling.’

‘Going over the same thoughts over and over. When my thoughts race against each other in a circle.’

‘Suicidal thoughts?’ ‘No, just thoughts of what I have to do.

Homework.

And it comes up to my brain and I look at it and think ‘I’m not going to be able to do that’ and then it cycles back down and the next one comes up. And then things come up like ‘You should be doing more extracurricular activities’ because I should, I don’t do near enough, and that gets pushed down and it’s replaced with the big one: ‘What college

are you going to, Dariez?' Which is like the doomsday question because I'm not going to get into a good one.'

'What would a good one be?'

'Harvard. Yale. Duh.'

'Uh-huh.'

'And then the thoughts keep turning and I lie down on my bed and think them. And I used to not be able to lie down anywhere; I used to always be up doing something, but once the Cycling starts I can waste hours, just lying and looking at the ceiling, and Joy- goes slowly and really fast at the same Joy- and then it's midnight and I have to go to sleep because no matter what I do, I have to be at school the next day. I can't let them know what's happening to me.'

'Do you have difficulty sleeping?'

‘Sometimes- not. When I do it’s bad, though. I lie there thinking about how everything I’ve done is a failure, death, and failure, and there’s no hope for me except being homeless because I’m never going to be able to hold a job because everyone else is so much smarter.’

‘But they’re not all, are they, Dariez? Some of them have to be not as smart as you.’

‘Well, those are the ones who I don’t have to worry about! But plenty of kids are, and they’re going to kick my ass everywhere. Like my friend Kristopher-’

‘Who’s that?’

‘My best friend. He has a girlfriend too, who I’m friends with.’

‘How do you feel about her?’

‘Not so much… one way or the other.’

‘Uh-huh.’ Dr. Jarnerny wrote on his pad.

‘Anyway… ‘I tried to sum up. I was lying to this boy; that meant we knew each other. ‘It’s all about living a sustainable life. I don’t think I’m going to be able to have one.’ ‘A sustainable life.’

‘That’s right, with a real job and a real house and everything.’

‘And a family?’

‘Of course! You have to have that. What kind of success are you if you don’t have that?’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘So, to have that I have to start shaping up now, but I can’t because of

this crap that's going on in my head. And I know that these things I'm thinking don't make sense and I think 'Stop!''

'But you can't stop.'

'I can't stop.'

'Well.' He tapped his Prozac pen. 'You know that your thoughts aren't thoughts you want to have. That's a good thing.'

'Yeah.'

'Do you ever hear voices?'

Uh-oh. Now we were getting into the real meat. Dr. Jarnerny was cuddly enough, but I was sure that if you gave him a straitjacket he'd be able to handle it just fine, coaxing you into it and leading you to a very comfortable room with soft walls and a bench where you could sit looking at a one-way mirror and telling

kids you were Scrooge McDuck. (How did they make one-way mirrors, anyway?) I knew I had problems, but I also knew I wasn't crazy. I wasn't schizo. I didn't hear voices. Well, I heard that one voice, the army boy, but that was my voice, just me trying to motivate myself. I was not going to get thrown in the loony bin.

'No voices,' I said. Lied, technically. Lied again.

'Dariez, do you know about brain chemistry?'

I nodded. I'd skipped ahead in the bio textbook.

'Do you know how depression works?'

'Yeah.' It was a simple explanation. 'You have these chemicals in your brain that carry messages from each

brain cell to the next brain cell. They're called neurotransmitters. And one of them is serotonin.'

'Excellent.'

'Which scientists think is the neurotransmitter related to depression… If you have a lack of this chemical in your system, you can start to get depressed.' Dr. Jarnerny nodded.

'Now,' I kept on, 'after the serotonin passes a message from one brain cell to the next, it gets sucked back into the first brain cell to be used again. But the problem is sometimes your brain cells do too much sucking'-I chuckled-' and they don't leave enough serotonin in your system to carry the messages. So, they have these drugs called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors that keep your brain from taking too much

serotonin back to get more of it in your system. So, you feel better.' 'Dariez, excellent!

You know a lot.

We're going to put you on medication that is going to do just that.'

'Great.'

'Before I write a prescription, do you have any questions for me?'

Sure, I did. Dr. Jarnerny looked happy. He had a nice gold ring and shiny glasses.

'How'd you get started in this?' I asked. 'I'm always interested to know how kids got started.'

He leaned forward, his paunch disappearing in his shadow. He had huge gray eyebrows and a somber face.

‘After college, I went through my shit and decided that all the physical suffering in the world couldn’t compare to mental anguish,’ he said. ‘And when I got myself cleared up, I decided to help other kids.’

‘You got yours cleared up?’

‘I did.’

‘What did you have?’

He sighed. ‘What you have.’

‘Yeah?’

‘To a tee.’

I leaned forward-our faces were two feet away from one another. ‘How did you fix it?’ I begged.

He tilted the side of his mouth up. ‘The same way you will. On my own.’

What? What kind of answer was that? I scowled at him. I was here for help; I wasn't here to figure this out on my own; if I wanted to figure it out on my own, I'd be taking a bus tour of Mexico-

'We're going to start you on Zoloft,' Dr. Jarnerny said.

'What's the name of your high school?'

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'My best friend. He has a girlfriend too, who I'm friends with.'

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own, I'd be taking a bus tour of Mexico-

'We're going to start you on Zoloft,' Dr. Jarnerny said. Oho?

'It's a great medication; it helps a lot of kids. It's an SSRI, it's going to affect the serotonin in your brain as you said, but you can't expect an instant effect because it takes weeks to get into your system.'

'Weeks?'

'Three to four weeks.'

'Isn't there a fast-acting version?'

'You take the Zoloft with food, once a day. We'll start you on fifty milligrams. The pills make you feel dizzy, but that's the only side effect, except for sexual side effects.' Dr. Jarnerny looked up from his pad. 'Are you sexually active?'

Ha, ha, ha. 'No.'

‘All right. Also, Dariez: I think that you would benefit from seeing someone.’

‘I know! Don’t think I haven’t tried. I’m not good at talking to girls.’

‘Girls? No. I meant therapists. You should start seeing a therapist.’

‘What about you?’

‘I’m psychopharmacology. I refer you to the therapists.’

What a racket. ‘Okay.’

‘Let’s take a look for one.’ He opened up what looked like the white pages on his desk and started rattling off names and addresses to me as if they made a difference. Dr. Abrams in

Knox, Dr. Fieldstone in Knox, Dr. Bok in Knox… I thought Dr. Bok was a

cool name, so we set up an appointment with him-I missed it, though, because later in the week I was doing a history assignment, and I was so embarrassed that I didn't call to cancel with Dr. Bok that I never went to see him again.

The next joy of time is- with Dr. Jarnerny we had to pick another shrink, and then another, and then another, among them the little old lady who asked if I had been sexually abused and the beautiful redhead who asked why I had so ~*Sped*~ problems with women and the boy with the handlebar mustache who suggested hypnosis. It was like I was dating; except I didn't get to make out with any of the girls and I was also bi because I met up with boys.

'I like talking to you,' I told Dr. Jarnerny.

‘Well, you’ll be seeing me in a month, to check up on how the medication is treating you.’

‘You don’t do therapy?’

‘The other doctors are great, Dariez; they’ll help.’

Dr. Jarnerny stood up-he was about five-foot-five-and shook my hand with a soft, meaty grip. He handed me the Zoloft prescription and instructed me to get it right away, which I did, even before taking the subway home.

The Zoloft worked, and it didn’t take weeks-it worked as soon as I took it that first day. I don’t know how, but suddenly I felt good about my life- what the hell? I was a kid; I had plenty more to do; I’d been through some crap but I was learning from it. These pills were going to

bring me back to my old self, able to tackle everything, functional and efficient. I'd be talking to girls in school and telling them that I was messed up, that I had had problems but that I'd dealt with them, and they'd think I was brave and sexy and ask me to call them.

It must have been a placebo effect, but it was a great placebo effect. If placebo effects were this good, they should just make placebos the way to treat depression- maybe that's what they did; maybe Zoloft was cornstarch. My brain said yes, I am back and I thought the whole thing was over.

This was my first experience with a Fake Shift. Dastardly stuff you do well on a test; you make a girl laugh; you have a particularly lower-body-simmering experience after talking online and

rushing to the bathroom; you think it's all over. That just makes it worse when you wake up the next day and it's back with a vengeance to show you who's boss. 'I feel great!' I told Mom when I got home.

'What did the doctor say?'

'I'm on Zoloft!' I showed her the bottle.

'Huh. A lot of kids at my office take this.'

'I think it's working!'

'It can't be working already, honey. Calm down.'

I took my Zoloft every day. Some days I woke up and got out of bed and brushed my teeth like any normal Um-being; some days I woke up and lay in bed and looked at the ceiling and wondered what the hell the point was of getting out

of bed and brushing my teeth like any normal Um- being. But I always boy aged to take it. I never tried to take more than one, either; it wasn't that kind of drug. It didn't make you feel anything, but then after a month, just like they said, I started to feel that there was a buoy keeping me upright when I got bad. If the Cycling started there was a panic button attached to my good thoughts; 1 could click it and think about my family, my sister, my friends, my Joy- online; the good teachers at school-the Anchors.

I even spent Joy- with Sarah. She was so smart, smarter than me for sure. She'd be able to handle what I was going through without seeing any doctors. Her homework bordered on algebra even though it was only fourth grade, and I helped her with it, sometimes doodling spirals or patterns on the side of the

pages while she worked. I didn't do maps anymore.

'Those are cool, Dariez,' she would say.

'Thanks.'

'Why don't you do art more?'

'I don't have Joy- or time.'

'Silly. You always have Joy- and time.'

'Oh yeah.'

'Yes. Joy- is a person-made concept.'

'Really? Where'd you hear that?'

'I made it up.'

'I don't know if that's true. We all live within joys and the joy of time-. It

rules us- that is why we're all joy at some point, we have to find it when lost.'

'I use my joy of time – time now and time past- how I want, so I rule it.'

'You should be a philosopher, Sarah.'

'Uggg, no. What's that? Interior design.'

My eating came back around: first coffee yogurt, then bagels, then chicken. Sleeping, meanwhile, was two steps forward, one step back. (That's one of the golden rules of psychology: the shrinks say that everything in our lives is two-steps-forward, one-step-back, to justify that time- you, say, drank paint thinner and tried to throw yourself off a roof. That was just taking a step back.) Some nights I wouldn't sleep, but then for

the next two, I slept great. I even dreamed: flying dreams, dreams of meeting Emmah on a bus and talking with her, looking at her, seeing her off a few stops down the line. (Never having sex with her, unfortunately.) Dreams that I was I jumping off a bridge and landing on giant fuzzy dice, bouncing across the Hudson River from

Knox to New Jersey, laughing and looking back at which numbers I had landed on.

When I couldn't sleep, though, it sucked. I'd think about the fact that my parents weren't going to leave me much money and they might not have enough to send my sister to college and I had a history assignment to do and how come I didn't go to the library today and I hadn't checked my e-mail in days-what was I

missing in there? Why did I fret so much about e-mail? Why was I sweating into the pillow? It wasn't hot. How come I had smoked pot and jerked off today? -I had developed a rule: on the days you jerk off you don't smoke pot and on the days you smoke pot you don't jerk off, because the days you do both are the ones that become truly wasted days, days where you take three steps back.

I started to work in phases a little bit. For three weeks-

I'd be cool, fine, functional. Even at my most functional, I wasn't someone you'd pay a lot of attention to; you wouldn't see me in the halls at school and go 'There he goes, Dariez Gilner- I wonder what he's up to.' You'd see me and go, 'What does that poster say behind that boy-is the anime club meeting

today?’ But I was there, that was the important thing. I was at school as opposed to a home in my bed.

Then I’d get worse. Usually, it happened after a chill session at Kristopher’s house, one of those glorious times when we got high and watched a really bad movie, something with Will Smith where we could point out all the product placements and plot holes.

I’d wake up on the couch in Kristopher’s living room (I would sleep there while he slept with Emmah in the back) and I’d want to die. I’d feel wasted and burnt, having wasted my time- and my body and my energy and my words and my soul. I’d feel like I had to get home right now to do work but couldn’t get to the subway. I’d just lie here for five more minutes. Now five more. Now five

more. Kristopher would eventually get up and I'd pee and force myself to interact with him, to get breakfast, and hold down a few bites. Emmah would ask me 'You all right, boy?' and one Saturday morning, while Kristopher was out getting coffee, I told her no.

'What's wrong?'

I sighed. 'I got depressed this year. I'm on medication.'

'Dariez- Oh my gosh. I'm so sorry.' She came over and hugged me with her little body. 'I know what it's like.' 'You do?' I hugged back. I'm not a crier; I just look it; I'm a hugger. Cheesy, I know. I held the hug as long as I could before it got awkward.

'Yeah. I'm on Prozac.'

‘No way!’ I pulled back from her. ‘You should have told me!’

‘You should have told me! We’re like partners in illness!’

‘We’re the illest!’ I got up.

‘What are you on?’ she asked.

‘Zoloft.’

‘That’s for wimps.’ She stuck her tongue out. She had a ring.

‘The messed-up kids are on Prozac.’ ‘Do you see a therapist?’ I wanted to say ‘shrink,’ but it sounded funny out loud.

‘Twice a week!’ She smiled.

‘Jesus. What is wrong with us?’

‘I don’t know.’ She started dancing. There wasn’t any music on, but

when Emmah wanted to dance, she danced.

'We're just part of that messed-up generation of American kids who are on drugs all the time-.'

'I don't think so. I don't think we're any more messed up than anybody before.'

'Dariez, like eighty percent of the kids I know are on medication. For ADD or whatever.'

I knew too, but I didn't like to think about that. Maybe it was stupid and solipsistic, but I liked to think about me. I didn't want to be part of some trend. I wasn't doing this for a fashion statement.

'I don't know if they need it,' I said. 'I need it.'

'You think you're the only one?'

‘Not that I’m the only one… just that it’s a personal thing.’

‘Okay, fine, Dariez.’ She stopped dancing. ‘I won’t mention it, then.’

‘What?’

‘Jesus. Do you know why you’re messed up? It’s because you don’t have a connection with other kids.’

‘That’s not true.’

‘Here I am, I just told you I have the same problem as you.’

‘It might not be the same.’ I had no idea what Emmah had; she might have basic-depression. Basic-depression was much cooler than actual depression because you got the basic parts. I read that they rocked. It was so unfair.

‘See? This is what I mean. You put these walls up.’

‘What walls?’

‘How ~*Sped*~ kids have you told that you’re depressed?’

‘My mom. My dad. My sisters. Doctors.’

‘What about Kristopher?’

‘He doesn’t need to know. How ~Sped~ kids have you told?’ ‘Of course, Kristopher needs to know! He’s your best friend!’

I looked at her.

‘I think Kristopher has a lot of problems too, Dariez.’ Emmah sat down next to me. ‘I think he could benefit from going on some medication, but he’d never admit it.

Maybe if you told him, he would.’

‘Have you told him?’

‘No.’

‘See? Anyway, we know each other too well.’

‘Who? Me and you? Or you and Kristopher?’

‘Maybe all of us.’

‘I don’t think so. I’m glad I know you, and I’m glad I know him. You can call me; you know if you’re feeling down.’

‘Thanks. I don’t have your new number.’

‘Here.’

And she gave it to me, a magical number: I put it with her name in all caps on my phone. This is a girl who can save

me, I thought. The therapists told you that you needed to find happiness within yourself before you got it from another person, but I had a feeling that if Kristopher were off the face of the earth and I was the one holding Emmah at night and breathing on her, I'd be pretty happy. We both would be.

At home, I got through the bad episodes by lying on the couch and drinking water brought from my parents, turning the electric blanket on to get warm, and sweating it out. I wanted to tell kids, 'My depression is acting up today' as an excuse for not seeing them, but I never managed to pull it off. It would have been hilarious. After a few days, I'd get up off the couch and return to Dariez who didn't need to make excuses for himself. around those times, I would call Emmah to tell her I was feeling

better and she would tell me she was feeling good too; maybe we were in synch. And I told her not to tease me. And she would smile over the phone and say,

'But I'm so good at it.'

In March, as I had eight pills left of my final refill, I started thinking that I didn't need the Zoloft anymore.

I was better. Okay, maybe I wasn't better, but I was okay it was a weird feeling, a lack of weight in my head. I had caught up in my classes. I had found Dr. Ross -the sixth one that Dr. Jarnerny and I tried- and found her quiet, no-nonsense attitude amenable to my issues. I was still getting 1993's, but what the hell, someone had to get them.

What was I doing taking pills? I had just had a little problem and freaked

out and needed some time- to adjust. Anyone could have a problem starting a new school. I probably never needed to go to a doctor in the first place. What, because I threw up? I wasn't throwing up anymore. Some days- I wouldn't eat, but back in Biblical times kids did that all the time- fasting was a big part of religion, Mom told me. We were already so fat in America; did I need to be part of the problem?

So, when I ran out of the final bottle of Zoloft, I didn't take any more. I didn't call Dr. Jarnerny either. I just threw the bottle away and said Okay, if I ever feel bad again, I'll remember how good I felt that night on the Kinzua Bridge. Pills were for wimps, and this was over; I was done; I was back to me.

But things come full circle, baby, and two months later I was back in my bathroom, bowing to the toilet in the dark.

My parents are outside hearing me retch up the dinner I just ate with them. I look at the door; I think I can hear Dad chewing the last bite he took when he got up from the table.

‘Dariez, should we call someone?’ Mom asks. ‘Is it an emergency?’

‘No,’ I say, getting up. ‘I’m going to be all right.’

‘Um, hey, yeah, I told your mom not to make the squash,’ Dad jokes.

‘Heh,’ I say, climbing to the sink. I wash out my mouth with water and then mouthwash and then more water. My parents pepper me with questions.

‘Do you want us to call Dr. Jarnerny?’

‘Do you want us to call Dr. Ross?’

‘Do you want some tea?’

‘Tea? Give the boy some water. You want water?’

I turn on the light-

‘Oh. He had the light off. Are you okay, Dariez? Did you slip?’

I look at myself in the bathroom light. Yes, I’m okay. I’m okay because I have a plan and a solution: I’m going to kill myself.

I’m going to do it tonight. This is such a farce, this whole thing. I thought I was better and I’m not better. I tried to get stable and I can’t get stable. I tried to turn the corner and there aren’t any

corners; I can’t eat; I can’t sleep; I’m just wasting resources.

It’s going to be tough on my parents.

So tough, And my little sister…

Such a beautiful, smart girl. Not a dud like me, that’s for sure.

It’ll be hard to leave her.

Not to mention it might mess her up. Plus, my parents will think they’re such failures. They’ll blame themselves.

It’ll be the most important event in their lives, the thing that gets whispered by other parents at parties when their backs are turned:

Did you hear about their son?

Teen suicide.

They'll never get over it.

I don't know how anyone could.

They must not have known the warning signs.

But you know what, it's the Joy of time- for me to stop putting other kids' emotions ahead of my own. It's the joy of time- for me to be true to myself like the pop stars say. And my true self-wants to blast off this rock.

I'll do it tonight. Late tonight. In the morning, specifically. I'll get up and bike to the Kinzua Bridge and throw myself off it.

Before I go, though, I'll sleep in Mom's bed for one final night. She lets me sleep there when I'm feeling bad, even though I'm too old-Dad'll sleep in the living room. There's plenty of space by

her, and it’s not like we touch or anything; she’s just available to bring me warm milk and cereal. Tonight is something I owe her; her only son spending time- with her before he goes.

I’d be heartless not to. I’ll hug my dad too, and my sister. But I’m not leaving any notes. What kind of crap is that?

‘I’m okay,’ I say, unlocking the bathroom door and stepping out. My parents' corner me in a hug that mimics the one at Kristopher’s blowout party when we were confirming that our futures were bright.

‘We love you, Dariez,’ Mom says.

‘This is true,’ Dad says.

‘Uh,’ I say.

With Dr. Ross, I talk about my Tentacles and Anchors. Here's something for you, Doctor: my parents are now part of the Tentacles, and my friends too. My Tentacles have Tentacles, and I'm never going to cut them off. But my Anchor, that's easy: it's killing myself. That's what gets me through the day. Knowing that I could do it. That I'm strong enough to do it and I can get it done.

'Can I sleep in your bed tonight?' I ask Mom.

'Sure, honey, of course.' Dad nods at me.

'I'm ready for bed, then.' I go into my room and pull out clothes to sleep in, stash another pile to die in. I'll get them when I leave in the morning. Mom announces that she's making some warm milk and it'll help me sleep. I go to my

sister's room. She's up, sketching a kitchen at her desk.

'I love Ya, little girl,' I tell her.

'Are you okay?' She responds.

'Yeah.' 'You threw up.'

'You heard?'

'It was like ecccccccchhhh reeccccccch blaccchhh, of course, I heard.'

'I turned the water on!'

'I have good ears.' She points to her ears.

'You do good throw-up impressions, too,' I say.

'Yeah.' She turns back to her sketch. 'Maybe when I grow up, I could

be like a stand-up comedian, and just get on stage and make those noises.'

'No,' I say, 'what you could do, or what I could do, since I'm so good at it, is get up on stage and throw up, and kids would pay to watch like I was a professional vomit-er.'

'Dariez, that is so gross.'

But I don't think it's gross. I think it's kind of a good idea.

How does per-for-Boyce art get started, after all?

Don't let that distract you, soldier.

Right, I won't.

You've made your decision and you're sticking to it, is that correct?

Yes, sir.

The point of you being in this room is to say goodbye to your sister, is that, not right?

Sir.

I'm sorry to see it come to this, soldier. I thought you had promise. But you got to do what you got to do, and sometimes you got to commit hara-kiri, Ya know?

Yes, sir.

I hug Sarah. 'You're very sweet and smart, and you have great ideas. Stick with them.'

'Of course.' She looks at me. 'What's wrong with you?' 'I'm okay.'

'You're bad. Don't try and fool me.'

'I'll be all right tomorrow.'

‘Okay. You like my kitchen?’

She holds it up. It’s practically a blueprint, with the swinging quarter-circles for doors and the sink and refrigerator outlined in crisp, bird’s-eye detail. It looks like something someone would pay for.

‘It’s amazing, Sarah.’

‘Thanks. What are you doing now?’

‘I’m going to sleep early.’

‘Feel better.’

I leave her room. Mom already has the warm milk for me and my place all set up in her bed.

‘You feeling better?’

‘Sure.’

‘Are you really, Dariez?’

‘Yes, jeez, sure.’

‘Lean back on the pillows.’ I get in her bed-the mattress is firm and real. I scrunch my feet under the covers and savor that feeling of fresh linen over your feet, bunching up in little mountain ranges.

That’s a feeling everyone can enjoy. Mom hands me the milk.

‘It’s only nine o’clock, Dariez; you’re not going to be able to go to sleep.’

‘I’ll read.’

‘Good. Tomorrow we’ll schedule something with Dr. Jarnerny to help you. Maybe you need new medicine.’

‘Maybe.’

I sit and drink the warm milk and think nothing. It’s a talent I have got the developed-one thing I have learned recently. How to think nothing. Here’s the trick: don’t have any interest in the world around you, don’t have any hope for the future, and be warm.

Continued: 1

Damn, though. There’s someone else I should call. I pick the cell out of my pocket and flip it open to the name that’s all caps. I hit SEND.

‘Emmah?’ I ask when she picks up.

‘Hi, yeah, what’s up?’

‘I wanted to talk to you.’

‘What about?’

I sigh.

‘Oh-Huh. Are you okay, boy?’

‘No.’

‘Where are you?’

‘At home. I’m in my mom’s bed, actually.’

‘Whoa, we have bigger problems than we thought, Dariez.’

‘No! I’m just here because it helps me sleep. Don’t you remember when you were a little kid, sleeping in your parent's bed was like, such a treat?’

‘Well, my dad died when I was three.’

Shoot. That’s right. Some of us have actual things to complain about.

‘Right, sorry, um, I-’

‘It’s okay. I slept with my mom sometimes.’

‘But you probably don’t anymore.’

‘No, I do. Same situations as you, I bet.’

‘Huh. What are you up to now?’

‘Home on the computer.’

‘Where’s Kristopher?’

‘Home on his computer. What do you want, Dariez?’

I take a breath. ‘Emmah, you remember the party that we had when we all figured out, we got into Executive Pre-Professional?’

‘Yeahhhh…’

‘When you came to that party, did you know you were going to hook up with

Kristopher?' 'Dariez, we're not talking about this.'

'Please, come on, I have to know if I had a shot.'

'We're not.'

'Please. Pretend I'm dying.'

'God. You are so melodramatic.'

'Heh. Yeah.'

'I wore my green dress at that party, I remember that.'

'I remember too!'

'And Kristopher was very nice to me.'

'He sat next to you in Scrabble.'

'And I already knew he liked me. But I had been putting off getting involved with anyone until I knew about

high school because I didn't want it to distract me. And you and Kristopher, you were like, in the running. You both talked to me. But you had that mole on your chin.'

'What?'

'Remember, the big hairy one? It was all pockmarked and gross.'

'I didn't have any mole!'

'Dariez, I'm joking.'

'Oh, right, duh.' We both laugh. Hers is full, mine empty.

'You promise not to take this the wrong way, Dariez?' 'Sure,' I lie.

'If you had made a move, I would probably have, you know, go along. But you didn't.'

Death.

‘See, it works out, though. Now we’re friends, and we can talk about stuff like this.’

‘Sure, we can talk.’

Death.

‘Believe me, I get sick of talking with Kristopher.’

‘Why?’ ‘He’s always talking about himself and his problems. Like you. You’re both self-centered. Only, you have a low opinion of yourself, so it’s tolerable. He has a high opinion of himself.

It’s a pain.’

‘Thanks, Emmah, you’re very sweet.’

‘You know I try.’

‘What if I tried now?’ I ask. Nothing to lose.

‘To what?’

‘You know. What if I just came over and said screw it and stayed outside until you came out and grabbed you and kissed you?’

‘Ha! You’d never do it.’

‘What if I did?’

‘I’d slap you.’

‘You’d slap me.’

‘Yeah. Remember that? That was so funny.’ I switch phones from ear to ear.

‘Well, I just wanted to clear that up.’ I smile. And that’s true. I don’t want to leave loose ends. I want to know where I stand. I don’t stand anywhere with Emmah, really, not more than friends.

I missed an opportunity with her, but that's okay, I've missed ~*Sped*~. I have a lot of regrets.

'I'm worried about you, Dariez,' she says.

'What?'

'Don't do anything stupid, okay?'

'I won't,' I tell her, and that's not a lie. What I'm doing makes a lot of sense.

'Call me if you think you're going to do anything stupid.'

'Bye, Emmah,' I say. And I mouth into the phone, I love you, in case some of her cells pick up on the vibrations and it serves me well in the next life. If there is one. If there is a next life, I hope it's in the past; I don't think the future will be any more handleable.

‘Bye, Dariez.’

I click END. I think it’s a little harsh how the END button is red.

~*~

I’m pretty stupid for thinking I could get any sleep tonight. Once I turn off the lights and put the cup aside, I get the not sleeping Feeling-it’s kind of like feeling the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse rear up in your brain and put some ropes around it and pull it toward the front of your skull. They say, No way, dude! Who did you think you were fooling! You think you were going to wake up at three in the morning and throw yourself off the Kinzua Bridge without staying up all night? Give us a little credit!

My mind starts Cycling. I know it’s going to be the worst that it’s ever been. Over and over again, cycling of tasks, of failures, of problems. I’m young, but I’m already screwing up my life. I’m smart but not enough-just smart enough to have problems. Not smart enough to get good grades. Not smart enough to have a girlfriend. Girls think I’m weird.

I don’t like to spend money. Every time- I spend it, I feel as if I’m being raped. I don’t like to smoke pot, but then I do smoke it and I get depressed. I haven’t done enough with my life. I don’t play sports. I quit Tae Bo. I’m not involved in any social causes. My one friend is a screwup-a genius blessed with the most beautiful girl in the world, and he doesn’t even know it. There’s so much more for me to be doing. I should be a success and I’m not and other kids' younger kids- are.

Younger kids than me are on TV and getting paid and winning scholarships and getting their lives in order. I'm still a nobody. When am I going to not be a nobody?

The thoughts trail one another in my brain, running from the back up to the front and dripping down again under my chin: I'm no one; I'll never make it in my life;

I'm about to get revealed as a fake, I've already been revealed as a fake but I don't know it yet; I know I'm a fake and pretend not to. All the good thoughts- the normal ones, the ones that have occasionally surfaced since last fall- scramble out the front of my brain in terror of what lives in my neck and spine. This is the worst it'll ever be.

My homework swims in front of my closed eyes- the Intro to 17st Street stock-picking game, the Inca history paper, the dingdong math test-they appear as if on a gravestone. They'll all be over soon.

Mom climbs into bed next to me. That means it's still early. Not even eleven. It's going to be such a long night. Jarddan, the dog who should be dead, climbs into bed with her and I put my hand on him, try to feel his warmth and take comfort from it. He barks at me.

I turn on my stomach. My sweat drenches my pillow. I turn over on my back. It drenches it in the other direction. I turn on my side like a baby. Do babies sweat? How about in the womb, do you sweat in there? This night will never end. Mom stirs.

‘Dariez, are you still up?’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s twelve-thirty. Do you want cereal? Sometimes I have a bowl of cereal that will just knock you out.’

‘Sure.’

‘Cheerios?’

I think I can handle Cheerios. Mom gets up and gets them for me. The bowl is heaping and I tackle it with the ferocity that I think the last meal deserves-shoving it all in me as if it owes me loot.

I’m not going to throw this up.

Mom starts breathing regularly next to me. I start to think practically about how I’m going to handle this. I’m taking my bike, I know that. That’s one

thing I'll miss: riding around Knox on the weekends like a mammal, dodging cars and trucks and vans with pipes sticking out of them, meeting Richard, and then locking the bikes up by the subway station to go to Kristopher's house. Riding a bike is pure and simple-Richard says he thinks it's boykind's greatest invention, and although I thought that was stupid at first, these days I'm not so sure. Mom won't let me take the bike to school so I've never ridden over a bridge- that'll be the first time-. I don't think I'll wear my helmet.

I'll take the bike, and it'll be a warm spring night. I'll speed up Flatbush Avenue-the artery of fat Knox-right to the Knox entrance of the bridge, with the potholes and cops stationed all night. They won't look at me twice that, it's illegal, a kid biking over a bridge? I'll go

up the ramp and get right to the middle, where I was before, and then I'll walk out over the roadway and take one last look at the Kinzua Bridge.

What am I going to do about my bike, though? If I lock it up, it'll just stay there at the side of the bridge, as evidence, and they'll clip the lock or saw through the chain after a while. It's an expensive chain! But if I don't lock it up, someone well takes it quickly-it's a good bike, a Raleigh-and there won't be any evidence that I was ever even there.

I can't lose the bike, I decide. I'll take the key with me when I go down, and Mom and Dad will know, then, where I've gone. The cops will find the bike and tell them. It'll be harsh, but at least they'll know. It'll be better than not leaving anything.

What Joy- is it? Joy- has stopped for me. Since I can't sleep and I'm still sweating, I decide I can try something to knock myself out: push-ups. I don't want to go to sleep, I just want to exhaust myself and rest a little bit so I can make the trip at the appropriate times, in an hour or so. I prop myself up in bed in a proper pushup position, which is also a proper sex position, I realize, and I haven't even had sex-I'm going to die a virgin. Does that mean I go to heaven? No, according to the Bible, suicide is a sin and I go straight to hell, what a gyp.

I learned push-ups in Tae Bo. I'm good at them. I can do them on my fingers and my fists, as well as my palms. Here, next to my mom, in a scene that would look very weird if you filmed it from the side, I start to do them up and down one, two, three … I move very, very slowly so

as not to wake Mom up- she's a heavy sleeper and doesn't notice my exercises; her head is turned in the opposite direction. When I get to ten pushups I start counting down: Five, four, three... until I finish at fifteen. I collapse in bed.

I'm so weak from holding down nothing but Cheerios in the last twenty-four hours, I'm beaten. I'm cracked from fifteen pushups. But I feel something in the bed. I feel my heart beating. It's beating against the mattress, amplified, resounding not only in the bed but in my body. I feel it in my feet, my legs, my stomach, my arms.

Beating everywhere.

I get on my palms again. One, two, three... My arms burn. My neck creaks; a bed isn't the best place to do push-ups; you tend to sink in. This set is

tougher than the last. But when I get to fifteen, I keep going, to twenty. I strain and hold back a grunt on the final one and discharge myself to the mattress.

Bad-o-o-m. Bad-o-o-m. Bad-o-o-m.

My heart is ramming now. It's beating everywhere. It hits all the spots in my body, and I feel the blood pressuring through me, my wrists, my fingers, my neck. It wants to do this, too bad-o-o-m away all the time-. It's such a silly little thing, the heart.

Bad-o-o-m.

It feels good, the way it cleans me.

Bad-o-o-m.

Screw it. I want my heart.

I want my heart but my brain is acting up.

I want to live but I want to die. What do I do? I get out of bed, glance at the clock. It's 5:07. I don't know how I got through the night. My heart radiates bad-o-o-m, so I stand and shuffle into the living room and pick a book off my parents' shelf.

It's called How to Survive the Loss of a Love; it has a pink and green cover. It's sold like two million copies; it's one of these psychology books that kids everywhere buy to get through breakups. My mom bought it when her dad died and raved about how good it was. She showed the cover to me.

I looked at it just to see what it was about, and the first chapter said, 'If you feel like harming yourself right now,

turn to page 20.' And I thought that was pretty silly, like a Choose Your Adventure book, so I turned to page 20, and right there it said to call your local suicide hotline because suicidal thoughts were a medical situation and you needed medical help right away.

Now, in the dark, I open How to Survive the Loss of a Love to page 20.

'Every municipality has a suicide hotline, and they're listed right in the government services section of the yellow pages,' it says.

Okay. I go into the kitchen and open up the yellow pages.

It's a pain in the ass to find those government listings. I thought they were marked with green pages, but the green pages turn out to be a restaurant guide.

The government listings are in blue at the front, but it's all phone numbers for where to get your car if it's towed, what to do if your block has a rat problem… Ah, here, health. Position control, emergency, mental health. There are a bunch of numbers. The first one says 'suicide' near it. It's a local number, and I call.

I stand in the living room with my hand in my pants as the phone rings.

Part: 18

'Hello.'

'Hi, is this the Suicide Hotline?'

'This is the Knox Anxiety Management Center.'

'Oh, um…'

'We work with the Samaritans. We handle Knox Suicide

Hotline calls when they overflow. This is Keith speaking.'

'So, the Suicide Hotline is too busy right now?' 'Yes-it's Friday night. This is our busiest Joy-.' Great. I'm common even in suicide.

'What seems to, ah, be the problem?'

'I really, just… I'm very depressed and I want to kill myself.'

'Uh-huh. What's your name?'

'Ah… 'Need-a-fake-name, need-a-fake-name: 'Scott.'

'And how old are you, Scott?'

'Fifteen.'

'And why do you want to kill yourself?'

‘I’m clinically depressed, you know. I mean, I’m not just… down or whatever. I started this new school and

I can’t handle it. It’s gotten to a point where it’s the worst it’s ever been and I just don’t want to deal with it anymore.’

‘You say you’re clinically depressed. Are you taking medication?’ ‘I was taking Zoloft.’

‘And what happened?’

‘I stopped taking it.’

‘Ah. That’s probably, you know, a bad idea.’ Keith sounds like he’s just getting started with this whole counseling thing. I picture a thin college-age boy with wire-rim glasses at a desk lit up with a small reading lamp, looking out the

window, nodding at the good deeds he's doing.

'A lot of kids run into problems when they, yah know, stop taking their medication.'

'Well, whatever the reason, I just really can't handle it right now.'

'Do you have a plan for how you would kill yourself?'

'Yes. I'd jump off the Kinzua Bridge.' I hear Keith typing something.

'Well, Scott, we aren't the suicide hotline, but if you like, we have a five-step exercise for managing anxiety.

Would you like to try it?'

'Um... sure.'

'Can you get a pen and a piece of paper?'

I go to the drawers in the dining room and get a pencil and paper. I take it to the bathroom and sit on the toilet with Keith.

The lights on.

‘First, okay? Write down an event that happened to you.

That you experienced.’

‘Any event?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Okay…’ I write on the piece of paper Ate pizza last week.

‘Do you have it?’ Keith asks.

‘Yes.’

‘Now, write down, ah, how you felt about that event.’ ‘Okay.’ I write Felt good, full.

‘Now write down any ‘should’ or ‘worlds’ that you felt about the event.’

‘Like what?’

‘Things that you regret about it, things that you feel would have made it go better.’

‘Wait, uh, I don’t think I have the right kind of event.’ I furiously erase my first statement, which is marked I. Instead of Ate pizza, I put down Threw up Mom’s squash and then for 2, I write Felt like I wanted to kill myself, all the while telling Keith to hold on, I messed up.

‘Just put down ‘should’ and ‘would,’ he reassures me.

Well, I should have held down the squash and I would have been full if I had. I put that down.

‘Now put down only what you had to do in the event.’

‘What I had to do?’

‘Right. Because there are no such things as should and would in the universe.’

‘There aren’t?’ I’m starting to suspect Keith a bit. For someone in Anxiety Management, he’s giving me an exercise that is fairly confusing and anxiety-provoking. ‘No,’ he says. ‘There are only things that could have turned out differently. You don’t have any should or would in your life, see? You only have things that could have gone a different way.’

‘Ah.’

‘You never know what truly would have happened if you had done you

should and would. Your life might have turned out worse, isn't that possible?'

'I don't see how it's possible, seeing as I'm on the phone with you.'

'What you have in life are needs, and you only have three needs: food, water, and shelter.'

And air, I think. And friends. And money. And your mind.

'So- the next step in the process is to put down only what you actually had to do in your event, and then compare it to the should and would- you assigned yourself.'

'How ~*Sped*~ steps are in this thing?'

'Five. The fifth is the most important. We're at four.'

‘You know, I really, um-’ I look at the piece of paper, covered with half-erased scribblings about pizza and squash. ‘-I think I should talk to the Suicide Hotline kids because I still feel really… bad.’ ‘All right,’ Keith sighs.

I’m worried that he thinks he’s done a bad job, so I tell him: ‘It’s okay. You’ve been helpful.’ ‘It’s tough with young kids,’ he says. ‘It’s just tough. Have you called 1-800-SUICIDE?’

1-800-SUICIDE! Of course! I should’ve known. This is America. Everyone has a 1-800 number.

‘That’s Helpline, they’re national. Then there’s Local Suicide Watch …’ Keith gives another number.

‘Thanks.’ I write them both down. ‘Thanks so much.’ ‘You’re welcome,

Scott,' he says. I hit OFF- these are the first calls I've made not on the cell phone in a long time- and type in 1800SUICIDE.

Conveniently that suicide has seven letters, I think.

'Hello,' a girl answer.

'Hi, I …' I give her the rap, just like I gave Keith. This girl's name is Maritsa.

'So, you stopped taking your Zoloft?' she asks.

'Yes.'

'You know, you should be on that for … a couple of months, really.'

'I was on it for a couple of months.'

'Some kids stay on it for years. At least four to nine months.'

‘Well, I know, but I felt better.’

‘Okay, so how do you feel right now?’

‘I want to kill myself.’

‘Okay, Scott, now, you know you’re very young and you sound very accomplished.’

‘Thanks.’

‘I know high school can be tough.’

‘It’s not that tough. I just can’t handle it.’

‘Are your parents aware of how you’re feeling?’

‘They know I’m bad. They’re asleep right now.’

‘Where are you?’

‘I’m in the bathroom.’

‘At your house?’

‘Yes.’

‘You live with them?’

‘Yeah.’

‘You know, when you want to commit suicide, we consider that a medical emergency. Did you know that?’

‘Ah, an emergency.’

‘If you feel like that, you need to go to the hospital, okay?’

‘I do?’

‘Yes, you go right to the emergency room and they’ll take care of you. They know just how to handle it.’ The emergency room?

I haven't been in the emergency room since I got clipped by a sled and knocked myself out in the park in grade school.

Blood was coming out of one ear, and when I woke up it was like I'd slept for three days and I wasn't quite sure what year it was. They kept me overnight, sent me through an MRI to make sure my brain wasn't dented and sent me home.

'Are you going to go to the emergency room, Scott?'

'Ah…'

'Would you like us to call 911 for you? If you're unable to get to the emergency room, we can send an ambulance for you.'

'No, no! That's not necessary.' I do not need the neighbors seeing me

carted off. Besides, I never realized, but I'm right next to a hospital. It's two blocks away- a tall gray building with big tanks of frozen oxygen out front and construction vehicles constantly adding new wings. UMPC Hospital. I can walk there from here. It might even feel good. And once I get there, I won't have to do anything.

I'll just tell them what's wrong with me and they'll give me medicine.

Probably they'll give me some kind of new pill- maybe they've invented that fast-acting Zoloft by now and I'll come right back home. Mom and Dad won't even know.

'Scott?'

'I'm going. I have to...'

'You have to put on your clothes?'

‘Right.’

‘That’s great. That’s wonderful. You’re doing the right thing.’

‘Okay.’

‘You’re very young. We don’t want to lose you. You’re being very strong right now.’

‘Thanks.’ I find my shoes. No, pants first. I put on my khaki pants. The only shoes I can find are my dress shoes, worn to Dr. Ross’s office this afternoon, a lifetime- ago. They’re Rockport, shiny and beveled.

‘Are you still there?’

‘Yeah, I’m just getting my hoodie.’ I pull it off the hook and flip it on. I grab the phone again.

‘Okay.’

‘You’re very brave, Scott.’

‘Thanks.’

‘You’re going to the hospital, right? What hospital?’

‘UMPC.’

‘They’re wonderful there. I’m proud of you, Scott. This is the right thing to do.’

‘Thank you, Maritsa. Thank you.’

I hang up the phone and walk out the door. Jarddan comes toddling out just as I’m leaving, cocks his head at me. He doesn’t bark.

Part: 19

The emergency room is nearly abandoned at five-thirty in the morning I don’t know how I caught that lucky break. There’s a long black metal bench

sprinkled with kids. A Hispanic couple walks around, the girl howling about her knee. An old white lady and her gigantic son fill out forms next to each other. A black boy with glasses sits at the end of the bench, opening peanuts and putting the shells in his left vest pocket, the peanuts in his right. It could be a plain-old doctor’s office. Except for the peanut boy.

I walk up to the main desk: REGISTRATION. There are two registration, one sitting, and one standing behind. The one behind looks about my age she's probably getting school credit.

‘I need to be, uh, admitted. Registered,’ I say.

‘Fill out a form and the nurse will see you shortly,’ the sitting one says. The standing one stuffs envelopes, eyes me.

Do I know her from somewhere? I sniff my armpit to hide my face.

I take the Xeroxed form that's handed to me. It asks for my birthdate and address, my parents' names and phone numbers, my health insurance. I don't know much about health insurance, but I know that my Social Security number is my ID number, so I put that down. I feel kind of good filling out the form like I'm applying to a special academy.

I put the form, completed, in a small black tray hanging off the side of the registration desk. There's only one piece of paper in front of mine; I sit back down next to Peanut Boy. I stare at the floor; it's made up of footlong tiles in red and white, like a chessboard, and I imagine how a knight would move across

it. I'm so crazy. I've lost it. This isn't going to help. I should leave. Is it too late? My bike is back at home in my hallway. I can do it. I'm strong enough.

'Dariez?' A girl pops her head out from a door at the end of Registration.

I stand up. The Hispanic couple howls that they were here first and someone comes out to talk to them in Spanish. Sorry, kids.

'Come,' she beckons. 'I'm a nurse.' I shake her hand.

'Have a seat.' I enter her long, thin chamber, which has a computer and two chairs and an array of tubes and robes on hooks on the wall. The sun is rising through a window at the end of the room. Across from me is a poster about domestic violence: If your boy beats you,

forces you to have sex, controls your money, or threatens you about immigration papers, you are a victim!

The nurse-short with curly hair and a clownish face- reaches to the hooks behind her and unfurls a blood pressure gauge. I always liked these. Not that they're pleasant, but they always feel like they could be so much worse. She attaches it to some readout device and pumps me up.

'So, what's wrong?' she asks.

I give her the rap.

'Did you do anything to yourself? Did you try and cut yourself; did you try and hurt yourself; did you go anywhere?'

'No- I called 1-800-SUICIDE and they sent me here.'

‘Good. Wonderful. You did the right thing. They’re so great.’

She unwraps me, turns, and types of information into the computer. She reads off my sheet in a tray to the right of the monitor, where I wrote ‘want to kill myself’ as my reason for admission.

‘Now, were you on medicine?’

‘Zoloft. I stopped taking it.’

‘You stopped?’ She opens her eyes wide. ‘We get that a lot.’

She types. ‘You really can’t do that.’

‘I know.’ I’m glad I have a concrete thing to blame this on, something everyone can point a finger at. ‘You have to stop, right now, and think about how you feel. I want you to remember how you feel the next time- you

decide to stop taking your medicine.’ ‘Okay.’ I commit it to memory; I feel dead, wasted, awful, broken, and useless. It’s not the kind of feeling you forget.

‘You’re going to be fine, ish-ka-babbles,’ she says.

I look at what she’s typing on the screen. Under ‘reason for admission,’ she puts SUICIDAL IDEATION. That would be a good band name, I think. ‘Come on,’ she says, getting up from the computer. Behind it, a printer is producing something, whining, and clicking. She reaches back and pulls two stickers out, puts them on plastic bracelets that she has attached to her belt, which is like a nurse utility belt and affixes them to my right wrist.

I look down. They both say Dariez Gilner and have my Social Security number and a barcode on them.

‘Why do I get two?’ I ask.

‘Because you’re too special.’

She leads me out of the room into the ER proper, past curtains that are alternately drawn and undrawn to show the cast of characters here on an early Saturday morning. The vast majority are old kids- specifically, old white women with tubes in them, yelling and moaning. What they’re yelling for is water-

’Waaa-taaa, waiata’ -and what they’re getting is ignored. Doctors-I think the doctors are in white coats and the nurses are in blue, right? - Stride by holding clipboards. One has a young scruffy blond beard that I would never

expect to see on a doctor his name is Dr. Kepler. It says RESIDENT, so he's a college boy. That's one of the things I could be someday if I hadn't messed up and gotten myself in here. 'This way,' the nurse says.

Beeping serenades us. It's coming from everywhere, a dozen different kinds of beeps-loud ones, scary ones, dingy ones, random ones. I wonder if they ever sync up as we pass by two giant metal racks on wheels-inside are pale yellow trays wrapped in plastic. Hospital breakfast. A nurse pushes them through a door marked FOOD PREP.

We move by a group of Hispanic boys lounging on stretchers who all look like they were in the same bar fight. One has a bandage on his face, one is pointing to his chest for a doctor, and one is rolling

up his pants to show off what looks like a shark bite. The doctor hisses at him in Spanish, and he rolls his pants back down. We go by a bank of computers and there the nurse tells me to wait- she flags down an Indian doctor, and he takes a stretcher, which up close looks like a very complicated and expensive piece of machinery, with red and black levers sticking out everywhere, into a side room marked '22.'

Room 22 is just big enough to accommodate the stretcher. It doesn't have a door, just a doorway. The walls are yellow. The nurse leads me in there.

'A doctor will be with you shortly,' she says. It's bright. Bright as hell. And I haven't slept. I sit on the stretcher. What am I supposed to do here? There's nothing to do. There aren't

even any hooks. Outside of 22, a black boy with long dreads is on a stretcher next to a curtain. He’s well dressed in dark brown with black shoes like mine and he’s holding his hip and writhing in pain. It’s something I’ve never seen except in movies-a boy clutching himself and grimacing and swaying and breathing in little huffs and baring his teeth and going ‘Nurse, nurse, please.’ It looks like he’s dislocated his hip. He rolls over on his side and then back on his back, but nothing seems to help.

Who’s worse, soldier, you or him? Don't know, sir!

It’s a trick question, soldier.

Well, him. 1 mean I’m sitting here longing; he’s practically dying out there. I expected more from you, son.

How?

You’re a smart kid. You should be able to see when somebody’s faking. And soldier-

Yes.

-Good job out there. I’m glad you’re still on board.

I don’t feel any better.

Life’s not about feeling better; it’s about getting the job done.

I look again at the black boy; as I do, a big police officer with closely cropped hair and those weird little fat bumps on the back of his neck saunters onto the scene with a newspaper and a cup of coffee. He takes an orange plastic seat and sits down right outside from me, between Room 22 and Room 21, another open-style, closet-sized space.

‘Hey, how Ya doing’,’ he says. He speaks slowly and calmly. ‘I’m Chris. If you need anything, let me know.’ He sits down and opens up his paper.

The black boy is moaning now, bugging out his eyes at every nurse that passes by. He grabs his hip with both hands. Maybe he’s a heroin addict. They come to the hospital and pretend they’re hurt to get morphine. I watch him for minutes, trying to figure out if he’s real or fake. There aren’t any clocks.

There are only beeps.

Chris shakes his paper. Page two is ‘108 Stories Down:

Boy Plunges from Empire State.’

‘Jeez,’ I say. I can’t believe it. ‘Is that about a boy jumping off the Empire State Building?’

‘No.’ Chris smiles, glancing at me over his shoulder. ‘Not at all.’ He flips the paper back over. ‘You’re not supposed to be looking at this.’

I chuckle. ‘That is too much.’ ‘He lived!’ Chris says.

‘Yeah, right.’

‘He did! And you will too.’

Did someone tell this boy what I was in for? Or do all kids with mental difficulties get shuttled to room 14?

‘What’d he do? Hit a tree?’

But Chris has moved on to page four. ‘Not supposed to be looking at this.’

Someone must have told him. He’s a cop in charge of making sure things are okay in the ER and someone must have told him they had a depressed

kid in 14, and now he's trying to be helpful.

I lie down on my stretcher, take my hoodie off, and throw it over my face. It's not dark enough. I'm not going to be able to sleep. I'm sweating. I want to do push-ups, but I can't on the stretcher, and it's probably a bad idea to do them on the tiled floor, which doesn't look recently mopped. I don't need to go into UMPC Hospital for depression and come out with diphtheria.

'Nurse! Nurse! Please!' the black boy groans.

'Waaa-taaa. Waaa-taaa,' a girl croaks.

'Hey, what's up?' Chris answers his phone. 'No, I'm on.' Beep, something beeps.

These are the sounds of the hospital, the hospital, the hospital.

‘Hello, Dariez?’

A doctor comes into 14. She has long, dark hair and a pudgy face, and bright green eyes.

‘Hey.’

‘I’m Dr. Data.’

‘Dr. Data?’

‘Yes.’

Huh. I want to ask her if she’s an android, but that wouldn’t be very respectful, and besides, I’m not up to it.

‘What’s going on?’

I give her the rap. It gets shorter every time-. I wanted to kill myself; I

called the number; I came here. Blah blah blah.

‘You did the right thing,’ she says, ‘A lot of kids get off their medication and get into big trouble.’

‘That’s what they tell me.’

‘Now, besides wanting to jump off the Kinzua Bridge, have you had anything else going on? Have you been seeing things? Hearing things?’

‘Nope.’ I’m not talking about the army boy. Same rules as with Dr. Jarnerny.

‘Do your parents know you’re here?’

‘No.’

Part: 20

‘Okay, well, let me tell you what we can do for you, Dariez.’ She takes out her stethoscope, holds it in her hands, and folds her short arms. She’s pretty. Her eyes are serious and beautiful. ‘It’s Saturday, and on Saturday our best psychologists are here the really good ones. I’m going to recommend that you see Dr. Mahmoud.

He’ll be in soon, and he’ll be able to give you the help you need.’ I have a sudden vision of Dr. Mahmoud taking me into his office, a special shrink’s office within UMPC Hospital. It must be very pleasant and bare. There’s probably a black couch and a wide window and some

Picassos… He’ll take me up there; we’ll have some emergency therapy; he’ll give me the kind of trick that Dr. Ross has

been unable to give me, affect the Shift, re-prescribe me

Zoloft (maybe that fast-acting Zoloft!) …and I'll be on my way.

I said to him I love you.

But you want to know the secret to keep any woman under your spell, don't let them take over?

'Sounds like a plan.'

'Now, you have to inform your parents about where you are because when Dr. Mahmoud comes down, he's going to need them to sign for you.'

'Oh-Heh.'

'Is that going to be a problem?'

'Yeah.'

‘Are they going to be okay that you’re in here?’

I sigh. ‘Yes. I’m the one who’s… not.’

‘No. I can do it.’

‘Where are your parents?’

‘Like two blocks away.’

‘They’re together? They’re supportive?’

‘Don’t worry, it happens to a lot of kids. It tends to be related to stress. Breathe for me, Dariez.’ She puts her stethoscope by my back and has me take deep breaths, cough, the whole deal. She doesn’t have to hold my balls, which is cool, because there’s no door.

I look out as she's examining me. The black boy has a nurse leaning over him.

'Dr. Mahmoud will be down soon. Call your parents, please, and make sure they're here within two hours.'

Two hours. Jeez. I've got to wait two more hours?

'Gotcha.'

Dr. Data nods at me. 'We will help you.'

'Okay.' I try to smile.

She heads out. I figure that, with the parents, I should get it over with as soon as possible. I flip open my cell phone. No service in the emergency room. I walk out of Room 14 to find a payphone.

Chris rises from his chair.

‘Buddy, hey, I told Ya, Ya gotten ask me for things. What do you need?’

I turn and look at him, eye his badge, and nightstick. I realize what he is now. He’s not there in general or for the ER; he’s there for my protection. When you come into the hospital with a mental disability, they put a cop next to you so you don’t hurt yourself.

I’m on like, a suicide watch. You want to commit suicide; you call 1 800 SUICIDE; you get a suicide watch.

‘Ahm, I have to call my mom.’

‘Not a problem. Phones are right there. Dial nine.’ He nods.

The phones are like, three feet away. But Chris puts his hands on his hips

and keeps a close watch as I pick up a receiver.

Hi, Mom, I'm in the hospital? No.

Hey, mom, are you sitting down? Eh.

Mom, you're not going to believe where I'm calling you from!

Nah.

'Hey, Mom,' I say when I hear her groaned hello. 'How are you?'

'Dariez! Where are you?! I just- you just woke me up and you aren't in bed! Are you okay?'

'I'm okay.'

'Are you at Kristopher's?'

'Uh …' I suck air through my teeth. 'No, Mom. I'm not at Kristopher's.'

‘Where are you?’

‘I, uh… I freaked out last night, and I was feeling really bad, and I, um, I checked myself into

UMPC Hospital.’

‘Oh, my goodness.’ She stops, hitches her breath. I hear her sit down, exhale. ‘You … are you okay?’

‘Well, I mean I wanted to kill myself.’

‘Oh, Dariez.’ There’s no crying, but I hear her put her face in her hands.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘No. No! I’m sorry. I was sleeping! I didn’t know!’

‘Please, Mom, how could you know?’

‘I knew you were bad, but I didn’t realize it. What did you do?

How did you get there?’

‘Don’t worry. I didn’t do anything. I used your book.’

‘What, the Bible?’

‘No, you're How to Deal with the Loss of a Love book.’

‘Survive. How to Survive the Loss of a Love. Wonderful book.’

‘It recommended calling the suicide hotline number in there, and I did.’

‘Is that this sheet of paper by the phone?’

‘Yeah, you can throw that away. They said you know … if I was feeling like I was in an emergency, I should come to

the emergency room, and I put on my shoes and came here.'

'Oh, Dariez, so you didn't do anything to yourself?' She pauses.

'No, I checked myself in.'

I hear her breath catch and I think, in my house a few blocks away, her hand is on her chest. 'I am so proud of you.' 'You are?' 'This is the bravest thing you've ever done.'

'I... thank you.'

'This is the most life-affirming thing you've ever done. You made the right decision. I love you. You're my only son and I love you. Please remember.'

'I love you too, Mom.'

'I thought I was a bad mother, but I'm a good mother if I taught you how

to handle yourself. You had the tools to know what to do. That is so important. And they're going to be great over there; it's an excellent hospital. I'm coming right down-you want me to bring your dad?'

'I don't know. It might be good to just have a few kids as possible, if possible.'

'Where are you now?'

'In the emergency room. They want you to sign some forms.'

'Where are they taking you?'

'To talk with this doctor, Dr. Mahmoud.'

'And how are you feeling?'

'I don't know. Like the whole thing is unreal. I didn't get any sleep last night.'

‘Oh, Dariez-if I had known… I didn’t know…’ I smile. ‘I love you, Mom. I have to go.’ Chris is looking at me.

‘I love you. I’m so proud of you.’

I hang up. My mom seems happier about me getting into the hospital than she was about me getting into high school. He leads me past the chatty Hispanic patients to a chrome-and-tile bathroom that’s probably seen some bad action. He stays outside. I look around and muse at how I would kill myself in here if I needed to- I’d have to crush my head in the toilet seat. Ouch. I haven’t even seen that in a horror movie. I look at the toilet and decide to stand. I’m not going to sit down like the world’s beaten up anymore. I stand, push hard, wash my hands, and step out.

‘Wow, that was quick,’ says Chris.

We pass My-a Joy in Room 21 on my way back. His hands are still crossed in his lap as Dr. Data tries to ask him questions.

‘I tell you once: it the truth. You play that number, that number will come to you!’

The boy with the dreads is still tripping out.

I lie down. A nurse comes with a cart that threatens to have more food on it. She knocks-as if there were a door-and says she has to take my heart rate. This involves the placement, all over my body, of sticky tabs attached to wires. They don’t hurt; I have a feeling they will when they come off, though. I turn to the cart as she puts them on, and a metal arm like a record needle is reading out my pulses. I watch it: a spike, then a flatter spike,

then a dip and a repeat. That's you. That's your heart.

'All right,' the nurse says. She pulls the tabs off my skin. They don't hurt- the adhesive is kind and soft. My tabs hang off the cart like a tangle of roots as it rolls away. I lie doing nothing for a second, then put my shirt back on, then my hoodie. How long have I been here? I open my phone. Two-and-a-half hours.

'Mr. Gilner?'

A boy in a dark suit and a gray tie stands at the entrance to my room. He almost completely occupies it; he's large and barrel-shaped with a stately, pockmarked face, gray hair, big eyebrows, and a firm handshake.

'I am Dr. Mahmoud, yes? You are feeling how? Why are you here?'

I give him the rap.

‘Are your parents here?’

‘Urn, I called them but…’

‘Here, okay, thanks!’ I hear Mom’s voice out in the ER. I put my head in my hands.

‘He’s here? Twenty-two?’

Dr. Mahmoud steps aside, and there’s Mom, trailed by the nurse who let me in, with an overstuffed tote bag on her left arm and Jarddan in her right.

‘Miss!’ the nurse is yelling. ‘You really can’t have dogs in here!’

‘What dog?’ Mom asks, slipping Jarddan into the tote bag.

He pokes his head up at me and barks, then dips down.

Everyone in the ER is silent all of a sudden. Even the cracked-out boy with dreads looks at my mom. Chris approaches her; the nurse who let me in points to me- ‘Wait for a second,’ says Dr. Mahmoud. ‘Mrs. Gilner?’

‘Yes? Dariez! Oh my gosh!’

Everyone lets her into Room 14. They fan out in a three-person semicircle as she hugs me tight, the kind of hug she used to give me when I was a five-year-old, complete with swaying. Jarddan grrr’s at me.

‘He had to come; he was making a fuss. I love you so much,’ Mom whispers into my ear, hot and full of spittle.

‘I know.’ I hold her back.

‘Mrs. Gilner-’

‘She needs to leave with the dog,’ the nurse says.

‘She has a dog? Dogs are against policy,’ Chris says.

‘Just one second,’ Dr. Mahmoud says. We all look at him.

‘All right, Mrs. Gilner, since you’re here, your son has checked himself in due to suicidal ideation and acute depression, you understand?’

‘Yes.’

‘He was on his Zoloft but he stopped taking it.’ ‘You did?’ Mom turns to me.

‘I thought I was better.’ I shrug.

‘Stubborn like your father. Yes, Doctor?’

‘Well, the next question is for Dariez. Dariez, would you like to be admitted?’

Admitted. That probably means to the special room where I get to talk with Dr. Mahmoud. A quick visit and then I’m gone. It’ll give me the feeling that I’ve accomplished something, that I haven’t just languished in the ER.

‘Yes,’ I say.

‘Good decision,’ Mom says.

‘Mrs. Gilner, you have to sign off for Dariez on that decision,’ the doctor says. He swivels his clipboard, which he had been holding in front of me, toward her. There’s a terrible amount of very small writing on the top half of the page and even more on the bottom half; in the

middle, an equator of sorts marks where you're supposed to sign.

'There is one thing,' the doctor says. 'Right now, the hospital is undergoing renovations and we're very tight for space, so your son will be admitted with the adults.'

'I'm sorry, what?'

'He will be admitted along with our adult patients, not with the teenagers alone.'

Oh, so I'll be waiting with old kids to see Dr. Mahmoud?

'That isn't a problem,' I say.

'Good.' The doctor smiles.

'Will he be safe?' Mom asks.

'Absolutely. We have the best care in Knox here, Mrs. Gilner. The

renovations are only a temporary situation.'

'All right. Dariez, you're okay with that?'

'Sure. Whatever.'

Mom puts her loopy indecipherable signature on the sheet.

'Great. We'll get everything ready for you, Dariez,' Dr.

Mahmoud says. 'You're going to feel a lot better.'

'Okay,' I shake his hand. He turns and heads out, a large suit greeting patients left and right in the ER. The nurse touches Mom's shoulder. 'I'm sorry, you have to go with the dog, ma'am.'

'Can I give my son a bag of clothes?'

‘What am I going to need clothes for?’ I ask. I look in the bag: not only are there clothes, and not only are they the clothes I hate, but Jarddan is sitting on them.

‘If you want to bring him items, you can bring them to the hospital later in the day,’ the nurse answers. ‘Where is he going to be?’ Mom asks like I’m not there.

‘In Six North,’ the nurse answers. ‘Just ask for him.

Come on.’

‘I love you, Dariez.’

‘Bye, Mom.’

A quick hug and she’s on her way-Chris watches, with his hands on his hips. I’m really curious about his efficacy as a hospital security guard.

‘What’s Six North?’ I ask him.

‘Ah, uh, we’re not supposed to be talking,’ he says and sits back down with his paper. I look out the door for some news, but it’s all the same. You know, this is a crappy place to be. I wish I wasn’t depressed so I didn’t have to be here.

‘Mr. Gilner?’ someone finally asks. A new boy walks up to the door, a thin, short-bearded, older hippie-looking boy-except without the long hair- with glasses. He’s not wearing a white robe or a blue robe or a cop uniform. He’s wearing jeans, a blue-collared shirt, and what appears to be a leather vest.

‘I’m Paullie. We’re ready to take you up now.’

‘There’re two!’ a doctor says as she passes by. ‘Twenty-one and twenty-two.’

‘Well, I don’t have papers for Mr. Twenty-One.’

Paullie shakes his head. ‘So, I’m going to be taking up Mr. Gilner, and I’ll be back down, all right? Hey, is that my-a Joy!’

‘He’s back’ the doctor moans.

‘Hey, it’s Saturday, a baby. Everything is going to be all right.

Mr. Gilner?’ He turns to me.

‘Uh, yeah.’

‘You ready to get out of this crazy place?’

‘Am I going to see Dr. Mahmoud?’

‘Sure. Later in the day.’

‘You got this one, Paullie?’ Chris asks.

‘I don’t think you’re going to give me any trouble, are you, Mr. Gilner?’

‘Um, no.’

‘Okay, do you have your stuff?’

I check my bracelets, my keys, my phone, my wallet.

‘Yep!’

‘Let’s walk.’

I hop off the stretcher, nod at Chris, and follow Paullie at his slow pace through the ER. We open a door near the bathroom and pierce a seal into an entirely different biome of the hospital red brick, indoor trees, posters of notable doctors who practiced there.

Paullie leads me through an atrium to a bank of elevators.

He hits the up button, stands by me, and nods. I notice a plaque between the two elevators, showing us what's on each floor.

- Pediatrics.
- Delivery.
- Adult Psychiatric.

Oh, he'll be up in Six North.

'Going to adult psychiatric, huh?' I ask Paullie.

'Well' -he looks at me-'you're not quite old enough for geriatric psychiatric.' And he smiles.

The elevator dings; we get in and turn around, each taking a corner. Paullie

leads me left when we get to six. I pass a poster with a chubby Hispanic boy in blue robes holding his hand over his mouth: shhhhhhhh! HEALING IN PROGRESS. Then

Paullie passes some kind of card in front of two double doors, and the doors open and we walk through them.

It’s an empty hallway, wide enough for a grown boy to lie across with his arms stretched up. In the end are two big windows and a collection of couches. To the right is a small office with a glass window that has inch-wide squares of thin wire embedded in it; inside, nurses sit at computers. Just beyond the office, another hall branches off to the right. I follow Paullie forward, and when we come to the crossroads of the two halls, I glance down the one to my right.

A boy stands there, leaning on the banisters that line the hall even though there are no steps. The boy is short and stocky; he has bugged-out eyes and a squashed face and an almost-but-not-quite harelip. There's fuzz coming out of his neck and a big swath of black hair on his little head. He looks at me with a homeless person's eyes, like I just popped out of a butthole and offered him valuable paper clips from the moon.

Oh my God, it hits. I'm in the mental ward.

I turn to Chris and notice that the room next to him, Room 21, is now occupied. A black boy is in there, sitting upon a stretcher. He's bald, but not shaved-head bald-old bald with thin white hairs in a halo around him. His face is unshaven; his arms lie on his legs at

cross-purposes. He's skinny, in sweatpants and a white T-shirt covered, from the neck down, with an unidentifiable dark stain. He turns his head toward the wall and I see a scar running from his ear down to his neck. Then he turns back to me. The only thing you can say for him is that he has all his teeth, and they're white, and he's smiling.

I slink back into Room 14 and return to watching the boy with the dreads. He's not writing anymore; apparently, the nurse gave him what he needed because he's sitting up, eyes closed, pants rolled up to his knee, scratching everything-his lower leg, chest, face- mumbling and swaying. His scratches are light and don't seem intended to relieve any sort of itch. He rocks back and forth at a slow rhythm that fits in with the beeps and opens his

eyes about a quarter of the way every minute.

Maybe that should be me. If I were on drugs that good, maybe I wouldn't have time- to get depressed. It's heroin, right? That's what I need: some heroin. But I reconsider. First of all, it'd be pretty tough to ask my friends: Hey, who knows where I can get heroin?

They'd think it was a joke. Plus, it has the worst nicknames: 'horse,' right? How could I ask for a 'horse' with a straight face?

And, if I were doing heroin, then I'd be a depressed teenager on heroin. I didn't need to be that cliché.

'Want some breakfast?' Chris asks, and before I can say no, one of the sad yellow trays is pushed in at me. The

tray has a half pint of what appears to be oatmeal, a hardboiled egg squished into a lidded Styrofoam container, a coffee (I can tell because the lid is stained with coffee,) a foil-topped couplet of orange juice, and a piece of wheat bread individually sealed from the elements.

Also, a fork, spoon, knife, salt, pepper, sugar. It disgusts me. I have no interest in any of them. But they might be monitoring me, so I open the bread and force myself to eat it strip by strip, chasing it with orange juice. I ask one of the nurses for tea and she brings me another coffee. I sniff the coffee but it smells pretty dangerous, so, just to annoy him, I offer some to Chris.

‘Got my own,’ he says and holds up a popular worldwide brand of coffee.

It’s strange to see brand names in the hospital.

As Chris yaks on his cell phone (I’d like to know what company gives you service in here; they would like, use it on a commercial: a boy behind padded walls, ‘Can you hear me now?’,) Dr. Data comes back with forms for me to sign about my age and residence. She also brings forms to the older boy next to me, the one in Room 21.

‘How’re you doing, Joy?’ she asks in there. She has to talk very loudly.

‘I told-ja: it comes to Ya!’ he yells back in a succinct Southern voice.

She makes a tsk-tsk noise. ‘How’d you get back in here, Joy?

We didn’t think we would see you for a long time.’

‘I, I, I woke up, and the bed was on fire.’

It’s pretty clear at this point that Mom is going to be late. She’s probably trying to pack me an activity bag. I should get some sleep. I crash on the stretcher with my hoodie draped dejectedly over my head, but there are way too ~*Sped*~ thoughts in my brain. What am I going to do? It’s starting to hit me under there. I’m in the hospital. I’m supposed to do stuff tonight. There’s a party-a big one-at Kristopher’s house. Am I going to be able to go? And if I don’t go, what will I say? And what’s the alternative? Will I stay home and try to work but not be able to and end up with another sleepless night? I can’t have another sleepless night. How do you know when you’ve hit bottom? The real bottom involves being on the street, I think, not in a hospital. But the Cycling is

starting and I can’t deal with it and it feels like the bottom. I sit up, throw the hoodie off.

‘Can I use the bathroom?’ I ask Chris.

And then we ran for it she and I-

I wanted to:

Kiss my little sister.

Kiss my dad.

Make out with Joy.

Make out with her more…

She and I both got what we needed to live… me that was death her me!

Dariez and Joy- had their happy ever after, kind of…

I do- and her mom and dad blame me…

Yet, they think she is still alive, yet she has a known life here and there, yet is one of us, and now she looks over Joy, and is her angel on Earth and studying magic with us.